

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in
THE MYSTERY OF THE
GOLD MINER'S GHOST





in

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OF THE
GOLD MINER'S GHOST**

Jupiter, Pete and Bob head to Dead Man's Canyon to investigate an apparent haunting at the house of Miranda Kramer. There appears to be sightings of the apparition of a gold miner who died more than a hundred years ago. According to legend, there is a curse on anyone coming close to the miner's hoard of gold. While in the surrounding area, The Three Investigators get themselves entangled in several seemingly unconnected events—an attempted break-in, a missing man, and not one, but two dramatic life-and-death battles with a savage beast.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Gold Miner's Ghost

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1. Welcome to Dead Man's Canyon

"Wait! I think it's here!" Bob Andrews looked out the passenger window into the night and pointed to an old, weathered wooden sign that had appeared in the beam of the headlights.

Pete Crenshaw braked.

"'Dead Man's Canyon'," Jupiter Jones read aloud from the back seat. "Well spotted, Bob, I would have missed the sign, half-hidden behind the brush. So this is where we have to turn right."

"At last..." Pete sighed. "Then it can't be much further. I'm dog-tired already. Too bad we had to slave away in the salvage yard until sundown. Your aunt can be really ruthless."

After driving for the past hour on the well-maintained road through the foothills of the desert in the hinterland of Los Angeles, Pete finally turned into a much narrower road. Here, the road surface was brittle and had been patched countless times.

Pete steered his MG into the canyon. In the darkness, all they could see of the landscape were dry bushes and spherical cacti along the side of the road.

"Why is this called Dead Man's Canyon, anyway?" Pete asked after a while.

"You mean you are only wondering about it now?" Jupiter asked.

"I've been wondering about it all along. I just wasn't sure I really wanted to know... but since we're here, you might as well tell me!"

"Bob researched the story," Jupiter said.

Bob nodded. "In 1852, a gruesome incident occurred here. An adventurer named John Dewey happened to strike gold in the mountains. Immediately he was gripped by the gold fever that so many people succumbed to back then. He hired workers and had them dig up the earth like a man possessed in search of veins of gold... but he found nothing. However, he refused to believe that. Instead, he suspected that his workers were stealing from him—workers he soon couldn't afford to pay. Anyway, they got very angry, and eventually, there was a revolt."

"What did they do?" asked Pete. "Hanged him?"

"Exactly."

The Second Investigator gulped. "Really?"

Bob nodded. "By the third month, with no pay, far too little food, and the occasional beatings when Dewey thought he had caught one of them stealing, the workers freaked out. They stormed Dewey's shack, dragged him out to a big tree and then hanged him."

"Oh my goodness!" Pete gasped.

Bob continued: "Just before he was hanged, Dewey uttered a curse. His last words were: 'You can kill me, but the gold is mine. Anyone who comes near it will pay with their life.'"

Bob took out his mobile phone. "This is Dewey," he said and showed his friends on his phone's display an old black and white photo of a short, slender man in a dirty shirt and suspenders. His face was barely visible as it was obscured by the shadow of a large, wide-brimmed cowboy hat.

"He was left hanging on the tree for years, for no one dared take his body down," Bob said. "Little by little, the dead body was eaten by birds until finally it fell off. Since then, this place has been called Dead Man's Canyon."

“Well, that’s a lovely story,” Pete said, and a shiver ran through him. Suddenly he felt cold.

“Many spooky stories surround the canyon. Time and again, Dewey’s ghost is seen in the mountains. Campers staying here in tents hear trees creaking at night, even though there’s no wind at all. It was as if something is dangling from them. Cars come off the road and crash into the rock face or speed down the precipice. John Dewey’s ghost has claimed many victims... and no one knows who will be next.”

While saying the last few sentences, Bob had lowered his voice and become quieter and quieter. Now he slowly turned his head to Pete and shouted loudly: “Boo!”

Pete winced and the car lurched slightly. “Geez, Bob, don’t do that! That’s dangerous while I’m driving!”

Bob and Jupiter laughed.

“Oh, Pete, you are so predictable!” Jupiter remarked,

“Yeah yeah, just keep making fun of me and my fear of such things. You can do this a hundred times and still find it incredibly funny. Do you know that fear is a bodily function that warns you of danger and possibly saves your life? I heard that on the radio the other day. So being fearful is very useful.”

“Some forms of fear are useful,” Jupiter countered. “Fear of a poisonous snake can save your life, but fear of ghosts is unwarranted... as there are no ghosts, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Good for you then, O fearless leader,” Pete mocked. “So why did Mrs Kramer ask us to come see her? She said on the phone that creepy things were happening in the canyon, didn’t she?”

“I couldn’t find out much details from her over the phone. We’ll see. By the way, we ought to be there soon, Pete. Another two or three minutes and you’ll see a large piece of land on the left.”

Pete slowed down and all three of them looked silently out the window so that they would not miss the house where Mrs Kramer lived. What they could only see were the cones of the car’s headlights cutting the road out of the night, and the stones, sand, and shrubbery along the way.

Jupiter looked out the side window while Bob rummaged in the glove compartment for a map. He wanted to check if they were in the right place.

Suddenly, Pete’s scream made him jump up. Then, everything happened very quickly. The car lurched, drifted into the oncoming lane—and a many-armed monster appeared in front of the windscreen.

Pete immediately jammed on the brakes, but it wasn’t enough. The car couldn’t stop in time and rammed head-on into the monster!

2. Dusty and Sniffer

All three were thrown forward on impact. The seat belts clicked into place, but Jupiter's forehead still slammed against the headrest of the passenger seat. The car jerked once more as it stalled, then silence came over them like a wave.

"Are you two still here?" Pete muttered after a few seconds, dazed.

"Yes," Bob replied. "I'm still alive. In fact, I don't think I'm even hurt."

"Just bumped my head," Jupiter muttered.

They got out of the car one by one.

The monster with the many arms was a cactus about one and a half metres tall. Pete had smashed it to pulp and the plant had thanked him with a dent on the front bumper.

The dent on his beloved car stung Pete, but then he saw what would have happened if it hadn't been for the cactus. Two metres in front of him was a steep rock face towering into the air.

"If the cactus hadn't stopped us... we would have crashed right into the rock."

Anxiously, he looked down the road to where he had steered off.

"What happened?" asked Bob dazedly.

"Yes, why did you lurch?" Jupiter asked. "Did a tyre blow out? Or did an animal run across the road?"

Pete stared at the two of them in disbelief. "Are you saying you didn't see him?"

"I was busy searching in the glove compartment."

"—And I was looking out the side window, not ahead. Who should we have seen, Pete?"

"Well, the man!"

Jupiter frowned. "Are you hallucinating?"

"No, I'm not! There was a man—short, white shirt with suspenders, and wearing a cowboy hat. He suddenly showed up on the side of the road."

Jupiter and Bob shook their heads silently.

"What do you mean he showed up?" Jupiter asked.

"Well, he was just standing there."

"Where exactly?"

Pete pointed into the darkness. "Over there, by the rocks."

Jupiter went off towards the rocks. Pete quickly dug his flashlight out of the glove compartment and followed him together with Bob. The black tyre tracks on the road showed them exactly where Pete had jerked the wheel around.

The three of them looked around and peered into the darkness. The road did not go through the valley, but wound up along the northern slope of the mountain. They had gained a good bit of altitude along the way. The rocks to the right of the road dropped steeply away. They couldn't see the bottom of the canyon as it was too dark for that. However, there was an eerie pull emanating from the empty, dark expanse. Somewhere a bird cried out.

"It must have been here," Pete said, stopping beside a rock.

"There's nothing here now," Bob said. "Rocks, bushes, sand... that's it."

"Light up the side of the road," Jupiter asked. "Maybe we'll find some tracks."

“Never mind, Jupe,” Bob said after a moment. “There’s rubble all over the place, so there’re no tracks to be made out.”

“So you believe me,” Pete sighed with relief. “I was beginning to think you thought I was hysterical or something.”

“Of course we believe you that there was something here,” Jupe said. “You certainly didn’t ram your car into the cactus for no reason.”

“I actually meant the man with the hat.”

Jupiter looked at him questioningly.

“Geez, Jupe, that man looked like John Dewey!” exclaimed Pete. “—The one in the photo Bob showed us.”

“Pete,” Jupiter said quietly. “I’m convinced you saw something—maybe a person, maybe a bird that flew through the cone of headlights, but certainly not John Dewey. You were still thinking about the legend of Dead Man’s Canyon, and your imagination turned it into—”

Suddenly, a sound of a vehicle approached.

“There’s a car coming,” Bob said.

In the next second, a car shot around the bend and headed for them with glaring headlights.

“Get off the road, Bob!” Pete yelled, taking two steps back himself.

The driver of the car didn’t see the three boys until the last second. Accompanied by booming horns, the Range Rover lurched briefly and sped past them, then braked and stopped at the side of the road. The red tail lights glowed in the darkness.

“He didn’t see us,” Jupiter remarked. “He probably didn’t even expect anyone out here at this time of the night.”

The driver’s door opened and someone approached them. They heard the driver before they saw him.

“Sniffer, come on! Get over here, Sniffer!”

A man stepped into the beam of Pete’s flashlight. It was an elderly man—short, slender and lean. He wore a loose, half-open shirt, colourful trousers, and sandals. Under his hat, his grey, thin hair hung down to his shoulders. His chin was adorned with a grey goatee. From clear blue eyes, he looked anxiously at The Three Investigators. “My goodness, is that your car there? Did you guys have an accident? Did something happen to you?”

“Good evening, sir,” said Jupiter. “Yes, that’s our car, but it’s not too bad. We’re lucky.”

“What happened?” the man asked anxiously.

“There was suddenly something by the road,” Jupiter said before Bob or Pete could answer. “We don’t know exactly what it was as it happened so fast.”

“Goodness! A coyote, perhaps? There are quite a few of those around here. You really have to watch out for them at night.”

Pete shook his head. “It wasn’t a coyote, it was a man.”

“A man?” The stranger looked around searchingly. “Where is he now?”

Pete shrugged helplessly.

“Maybe it was something else entirely,” the man wondered aloud, stroking his beard. “You’re in Dead Man’s Canyon. Strange things happen here sometimes, don’t they, Sniffer?” He stroked the dog at his side... only there was no dog there. In fact, the man was just patting the air next to his lower right leg.

“Sniffer’s a little anxious too. Animals sense things like that, yes, but there’s no use worrying about it. It’s better to just accept it. What are you boys doing out here at this time of the night?”

“We’re... uh... visiting someone,” Bob explained, very confused by the invisible dog.

“Geez, you guys would have been better off staying on the main road. That’s the faster way east. Dead Man’s Canyon is not a good shortcut, in fact, it is a dangerous road.”

“No, we’re visiting someone here in the canyon,” Jupiter clarified.

“Nobody lives here in the canyon except me and my friends.”

“Miranda Kramer,” Jupiter continued.

The man’s face brightened. “Oh, I see, Miranda. Why didn’t you say so? She’s my neighbour. Yes, and she also mentioned she was having visitors... from Rocky Beach, isn’t it? I’m Dusty Kirkpatrick. Call me Dusty.” He extended his hand to the three of them and they introduced themselves. “I can show you the way to Miranda’s place if you want. It’s only a short distance away, but it’s easy to drive past it if you don’t know your way around.”

“That would be very kind of you, Dusty,” Jupiter said.

“Oh, I’ll be glad to do that. Watch out for that gnarled dead tree on the side of the road. Come on, Sniffer!” Dusty returned to his car.

The Three Investigators got back into the MG and followed the rickety Range Rover.

“Say, did you see a dog?” asked Pete. “—Or do I need glasses?”

“We didn’t see a dog either,” Bob replied.

“Don’t you think that’s a little... strange?”

“Yes, I do,” Jupiter said.

Less than a minute later, they saw the dead tree. Dusty turned left. A dusty dirt track led up narrow bends to the ridge. Then a large estate came into view. There wasn’t much more to make out than a few illuminated windows.

Dusty pulled into a small unpaved car park next to a high quarry stone wall and a wrought-iron ornate gate.

“Wow, pretty fancy, the way our client lives,” Bob remarked as he got out.

“Posh, yes,” Jupiter said, “but Mrs Kramer doesn’t live here at all, as she explained to me on the phone.”

“Right,” said Dusty, who had heard the last words. He pointed into the darkness. “Miranda lives up there in a little house of her own. Just follow along the wall, at the next corner, turn left and continue until you see a narrow path leading up the ridge. The path will lead to her house. It’ll only take a minute.”

“Thanks, Dusty” Bob said.

“All right,” Dusty said with a wave of his hand. “Come on, Sniffer! Come on!”

The dog, who wasn’t even there, apparently jumped out of the car, because moments later, Dusty closed the door, patted the air, and said: “Have a good evening!”

“Can I ask you one more question?” Jupiter held Dusty back.

“Of course, my boy.”

“What did you mean earlier when you said it could have been ‘something else entirely’?”

“I meant... well... something else. Don’t you know the stories about Dead Man’s Canyon?”

“You mean John Dewey?” asked Pete.

Dusty nodded. “Sometimes he messes around here.”

“Have you seen him?”

“No, but Sniffer sometimes senses his presence. Not to worry—if you leave him alone, he’ll leave you alone... Anyway, I’ve got to go now. See you around!” He waved them goodbye, turned, and stepped through the gate, carefully locking it behind him.

“... If you leave him alone...” Pete repeated when Dusty was out of earshot.

“Pete, don’t go bringing that up again—”

"I'm not bringing up anything," Pete interrupted the First Investigator calmly. "I am merely repeating what the man just said, and I saw someone who looked like John Dewey. Now let us go to Mrs Kramer."

While they were getting their bags out of the boot, Bob asked: "Could it have been Dusty you saw? After all, he was wearing a hat as well. He could have been walking back to his car. Maybe he was playing a trick on us."

Pete shook his head. "The man by the road had no beard... and his pants weren't the same either."

They walked along the wall following Dusty's direction. Shortly, they reached a Joshua tree, behind which was the path. Leaving the walled estate behind, they made their way up the ridge, illuminated by the magnificent starry sky.

A wooden house appeared in front with smoke rising from the chimney. It was small and looked like a witch's cottage. Three wooden steps led up to a raised verandah that spans the front of the house. There were windows with wooden shutters, and next to the front door was a heavy knocker in the form of a solid metal ring.

Jupiter, who was leading the way, had not yet set his foot on the bottom step when the door opened and a woman in her mid-fifties stood facing them. Her ash-blond hair was streaked with grey strands and carelessly tied up. She wore a faded red and yellow dress, with a threadbare cardigan over it. Her expression was nervous.

"Are you The Three Investigators?"

Jupiter nodded, climbed the stairs and presented the woman with the business card of The Three Investigators:



"I'm Jupiter Jones... and these are my friends, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews."

"Miranda Kramer. You're finally here!"

"We're sorry our arrival was a little delayed. We didn't get out of Rocky Beach sooner."

"Never mind. Come in, come in!"

They entered the house, which was just as simply furnished as one might expect from the outside. The large main room, with two more doors leading off of it, was a sort of eat-in kitchen. One half was dominated by a large drawing table with a tilted work surface, on which lay a large-scale black and white drawing of a friendly-looking dragon that was not quite finished. A shelf against the wall held numerous paint pots, brushes, and pencils. All the furniture was made of wood. From the ceiling hung bunches of dried plants that gave off a peculiar scent, a wind chime made of copper tubes and a hanging basket of kitchen herbs. A small fire flickered and crackled in a fireplace.

"Have a seat," Miranda Kramer said, nervously twirling the ring on her finger and pointing to a bench made from a tree trunk. There was a half-full ashtray on the table and the table top was covered in tobacco crumbs. Hastily, she took the ashtray away and wiped the crumbs onto the worn wooden floor.

They sat down and Mrs Kramer offered them tea and a stew steaming on an old-fashioned stove. Gratefully, the three accepted. While Mrs Kramer took out brown earthenware plates from a shelf above the sink and proceeded to set the table, she spoke to the boys without looking at them.

“I wasn’t sure if I should really call on you guys. Barclay, who lives down at Desert View, told me something about an old friend whose nephew has an investigation business that specializes in... unusual cases... so I thought maybe you guys could help me out. Go ahead, eat!”

The Three Investigators tasted the stew, which was surprisingly good, and Miranda joined them at the table.

“Honestly, I thought you guys would be older.”

Jupiter shrugged. “That’s what a lot of people think. Still, we’ve been able to solve many cases.”

Mrs Kramer began to play nervously with the ring on her finger again. “Now that you three are here, this all seems like a very silly idea.”

“Mrs Kramer,” Jupiter said, “why don’t you just tell us why you asked us to come?”

Miranda nodded, took a deep breath... when suddenly, the window next to the front door exploded with an incredible loud bang!

3. Haunting at Miranda's

Shards of glass flew through the air and rained down on the wooden floor. Miranda screamed and The Three Investigators were paralyzed... but only for a moment.

"Come on, fellas!" cried Jupiter. "We have to check!"

Bob, who was sitting on the edge of the bench, jumped up, ran to the door, and pulled it open. Outside there was silence and darkness. No one was to be seen. Pete appeared at his side.

"You on the left, me on the right!" Pete said curtly, and at the same time they jumped down from the verandah and ran around the house. At the back, they almost collided.

"Well?" asked Pete breathlessly.

"Nothing," Bob said. "Nobody."

They peered out into the night and listened, but nothing suspicious could be seen or heard.

When they returned to the front, Jupiter was waiting for them.

"There's no one there," Bob reported.

Jupiter frowned. "Could the culprit have run away so quickly?"

Bob shook his head. "It only took me a few seconds to get to the door. It may be dark, but I should still have seen him."

"—Not if he broke the window from a distance," Pete said, "with a stone or something."

"Quite right, Pete, but I've already checked—not a stone or anything else on the floor."

They went back inside the house, where the wind chimes tinkled softly in the breeze.

Miranda sat on the bench, looking at them with eyes widened in terror. "No one there, right?"

"It seems like it," Jupiter replied.

Miranda buried her face in her hands and began to sob quietly.

"Mrs Kramer!" Bob said anxiously.

It was quite a while before she was able to talk to the three boys again. Meanwhile, Pete swept up the broken glass and Jupiter closed the shutters to keep out the cold air.

"It's been going on for days now," Mrs Kramer said at last, blowing her nose into her handkerchief and rolling a cigarette with shaky fingers.

"What exactly, Mrs Kramer?" asked Jupiter.

"Please... call me Miranda."

"Okay, Miranda. Please tell us from the beginning what happened and why you called us."

She nodded. "All right, then. I haven't lived in this house for long—just a few months." She pointed to her drawing table and art equipment. "I'm an illustrator. I do drawings for magazines and books... but lately things haven't been going so well and I've been a bit short of money. That's when my old friend Miles Kendall, who owns practically everything around here, offered me the chance to move into his big estate, Desert View. Barclay, your uncle's friend, stays there.

"However, I didn't want to live there. Miles and his friends are a close-knit community, and I didn't want to get in the way. Luckily, this house was still available. It's a bit lonely, but I can always join the others. Anyway, I like the view up here... but then... uh... four days

ago, it happened..." Miranda Kramer lit her cigarette. Her first drag was greedy and deep. Bob suppressed a cough.

"I was already asleep when suddenly a noise woke me," she continued. "It sounded like footsteps on sand and stones—like someone was prowling around my house. I thought maybe it was a stray coyote, and eventually it stopped..."

"The next night, the sound returned. This time I was quite sure it was human footsteps, because they were on my verandah. Someone was pacing up and down in front of my door."

"Have you looked?" Jupiter asked.

Mrs Kramer nodded. "I looked out the window... but there was no one there. You understand,, I kept hearing the footsteps, but I didn't see anyone. It's like the person causing them was invisible."

"Was the verandah lit?"

"No, but the moonlight was bright enough."

While Pete was already shifting uneasily back and forth on the bench, Jupiter just nodded thoughtfully. "—And then what?"

"The third night, I heard the footsteps again. This time I saw something out the window. A man was standing on the path that leads to the house. He just stood there, very still, looking up at me. It was the scariest thing I've ever seen." A shiver ran through Miranda Kramer and she shook herself.

"What did the man look like?" Jupiter asked.

"Do you know where Dead Man's Canyon got its name?" asked Miranda.

"John Dewey..." Pete murmured.

Miranda nodded. "Then you know the story. Out there on the path was John Dewey. I recognized him from a photo—same clothes, same hat. I couldn't see his face, but I'm sure he was looking at me. I got so scared I drew the curtains. A while later, I dared to look out again, but he was gone." Miranda Kramer stubbed out her cigarette and immediately rolled another one.

"The fourth night, the exact same thing happened," she continued, "except that John Dewey had come closer. That was yesterday. I called you guys after that." Miranda had gone pale. "What's going on here? Can you tell me?"

Pete cleared his throat. "So, this John Dewey—"

Jupiter nudged the Second Investigator under the table with his foot. Miranda's nerves were down enough as it was. Jupiter didn't think it was wise to tell her about the creepy encounter they had on the way here. Fortunately, Pete took the hint.

"—This John Dewey guy is supposed to haunt this place, right?" continued Pete.

Miranda nodded. "They say he haunts those who get too close to his gold. That is what worries me so much. After all, this house I now live in... was previously his."

4. Night Watch

“Excuse me?” asked Pete, startled. “This was John Dewey’s house?”

Miranda nodded. “It was standing half derelict when Miles Kendall bought it. Did you see that gnarled tree down by the road? That’s the tree John Dewey was hanged from.”

“Oh, my goodness!” Pete gulped.

“While Miles was building Desert View, he was also restoring this house. He liked the idea of resurrecting John Dewey’s house. I didn’t care until a few days ago. I wasn’t afraid of ghosts, but now...” Miranda’s gaze had taken on a feverish look. “You’ve got to help me! What should I do? Can I do something about John Dewey’s ghost, or would it be better to obey his will and leave this house?”

“I’d leave,” Pete said, earning a reproachful look from Jupiter.

The First Investigator took the floor. “Miranda, there is absolutely no reason to believe that the man with the hat was anything other than just that—a man with a hat. I don’t yet have an explanation for the noises on the verandah and the destruction of the window pane, but I’m sure there is one. More important to me at the moment than the question of how is the question of why... and there’s one answer that stands to reason—someone wants you out of this house.”

Confused, Miranda looked at Jupiter through the blue haze of cigarette smoke. “Someone wants me out of this house? But who would want such a thing?”

“Only you can tell us that. Do you know people who are not well-disposed towards you?”

“Not well-disposed?” She mused. “Off hand, I don’t know any.”

“—Someone from your past, perhaps?”

She shook her head, perplexed.

“Another possibility is that it’s not about you as a person, but about this house. Someone doesn’t like the fact that John Dewey’s house is occupied, no matter by whom. Did you notice anything unusual about this place before you were threatened? Perhaps a secret hiding place or something that belonged to John Dewey?”

Miranda shook her head slowly. “The house was a ruin before Miles bought it... and when I moved in, it was completely empty. So for this to be about the house... I don’t know... After all, I’ve lived here for months, but the incidents only started four days ago.”

Jupiter nodded thoughtfully. “Did anything out of the ordinary happen four days ago?”

“No.”

“What I’d also like to know is what about your neighbours at Desert View? Have they noticed anything about the haunting? Have you spoken to them about it?”

Miranda looked down at the table top, embarrassed. “No. I only told Barclay that I’d like to meet you guys sometime. In fact, I asked him to contact your uncle... but I didn’t tell him why. After all, I don’t know any of them at Desert View very well yet. I didn’t want them to think I was crazy or anything.”

“We’ll definitely have to talk to the residents of Desert View,” Jupiter said. “After all, they are possible perpetrators.”

Miranda looked up, startled. “Possible perpetrators? What makes you think of that?”

The First Investigator shrugged. "It's obvious. Whether you live up here or not is apparently only relevant to a very small group of people—your neighbours."

"—But why would they want me out of here?"

"That's what we need to find out. Maybe you can tell us a little about the people who live at Desert View."

"What can I tell you... Miles is the only one I know well. I might have talked to him about many things, but he's not here at the moment. His friend Barclay, on the other hand, is your uncle's acquaintance. I'm on good terms with him, but we're not particularly close. I hardly know Holly. We haven't really warmed to each other yet."

"What about Dusty?" asked Bob.

"You know him?"

"We met him by the road on the way here. He showed us your place."

"I like Dusty." A little blush rose in Miranda's pale cheeks. "He's very nice... but I don't know much about him."

"He was a little... odd," Bob ventured cautiously.

"Oh, you must mean his dog, Sniffer." Miranda smiled. "Yeah, it takes some getting used to... but it's surprisingly quick. At some point, you even believe that Sniffer really exists."

Pete raised his eyebrows. "You mean Dusty's just imagining it?"

Miranda was amused. "Well, have you seen the dog?"

Pete shook his head, wondering what kind of explanation he was expecting.

Jupiter stood up and looked out through the second, intact window. Miranda's house was high enough for him to see over the quarry stone wall into Desert View. At the centre of the property was a large two-storey house, and on the side facing away from the canyon, was an illuminated swimming pool.

"Miles Kendall, Barclay, Holly, Dusty," Bob enumerated. "Is that everyone who lives there?"

"Permanently yes. Dusty's granddaughter Raven is here on a visit, but she'll be leaving soon."

"What about Mr Sobek?" Jupiter asked.

"Oh yes, I forgot," Miranda admitted. "Miles and Mr Sobek have been living there the longest."

"Well, we'll meet all of them when we make our appearance at Desert View tomorrow and talk to the residents about what happened."

Miranda played with her ring again. "Is this really necessary? I'm a bit of an outsider here. I don't want to give the impression that I'm suspecting my neighbours."

"We will proceed cautiously," Jupiter promised. "Besides, your neighbours come into question not only as perpetrators, but also as witnesses. Maybe one of them saw something and, just like you, was afraid to talk about it."

Pete let out a yawn and together they decided to go to bed.

"I've prepared the guest room for you. It's quite small. Two of you can share a wide bed, and the third will have a mattress on the floor."

"One of us will have to keep watch so we can catch the man in the act if he shows up again," Bob said.

"All night?"

"We'll take turns," Pete stated, immediately raising his hand. "Me first!" As he would not be able to shirk the duty, then he might as well go first.

After The Three Investigators had moved into their room and Bob and Jupiter were already in bed. From his post at the window, Pete asked: "Aren't we supposed to tell Miranda what I saw?"

"Right now, we would probably scare her more with that than helping her," Bob commented.

"When I saw the figure on the side of the road, we were only about a hundred metres from the tree where John Dewey was hanged," Pete muttered. "What if I saw was really a ghost..."

"Pete," Jupiter interrupted him. "Please, not again."

"It's okay," Pete mumbled, wrapping himself in a woollen blanket and gazing silently out the window. Soon Jupiter and Bob had fallen asleep.

The window opened onto the verandah, so Pete had a direct view of Desert View from here as well. In the bluish light of the swimming pool, the two-storey house shimmered like a mirage. Gradually the lights behind the windows went out. Someone stepped outside and sat at the edge of the pool, legs in the water. By the clothes and gaunt figure, Pete recognized Dusty. He had taken off his hat, lit a pipe, and smoked for about ten minutes.

Shortly afterwards, a girl with black hair showed up carrying a guitar. She had to be Dusty's granddaughter, Raven. She joined him and played a short tune that was barely audible to Pete. However, laughter echoed over two or three times.

After fifteen minutes, Dusty and Raven left their spot by the pool. Shortly thereafter, the pool lights went out. Now the house was completely in darkness.

Pete was getting sleepy, and now that there was nothing to see, it wasn't easy for him to stay awake.

Moonrise announced itself as a bright glow before the moon slid over the horizon, speckling the mountain ridge in silver and black. Pete watched as the shadows slowly shortened. One of those shadows moved among the rocks and shrubs, and it had four legs. It was a coyote. Pete watched it until it was out of sight. Then his eyes wandered over rocks, cacti, and sparse undergrowth.

The moon rose higher, like a basketball slowly drifting towards Pete. The Second Investigator reached out, snatching the moon from the sky and dribbling it over the mountains. The coyote tried to take the moon from him, but it had no chance. It started howling in anger and Pete thought he had better retreat.

Back at his observation post by the window, he realized that he had something to do, but he couldn't recall what it was. To make matters worse, the coyote's continuous howl disturbed his thoughts, pushing aside the desert silence. The howl grew louder and louder and louder like a death cry, until...

5. Alarm!

“Pete! Wake up!”

Pete winced, nearly fell off his chair, and looked around in a daze.

Next to him was Bob. Jupiter was just waking up, and the coyote was still howling... or was it a dog? Or water boiling in a kettle?

“That’s an alarm system!” exclaimed Bob. “Down at Desert View! Quick, we’ve got to see what’s happening!”

Pete shook off his sleep and got up from the chair, while Bob was already putting on his sports shoes. Pete did the same. Through the window, he saw that Desert View was brightly lit.

“What’s going on?” Jupiter asked sleepily.

“Perhaps a burglary,” said Bob curtly. “Quick!”

Pete and Bob ran out of the room. In the corridor, they almost bumped into Miranda Kramer. “What happened?” she asked.

“Later, Miranda!” They stormed down the stairs and out the front door.

The night greeted them with an icy chill and drove away the last of their tiredness. Together they ran down the stony path towards the estate.

“Like before,” Pete suggested. “You on the left, me on the right. Maybe we’ll catch someone!”

Bob nodded and they split up. He ran past the Joshua tree and reached the corner of the wall beyond which lay the gate and the small unpaved car park. He paused and peered out into the night, but spotted no one. Shouts and footsteps could be heard behind the wall.

Out of sudden, the alarm stopped. Then Bob heard more footsteps! But were they even behind the wall? Were they not... behind him?

He whirled around. A figure appeared out of nowhere, shoved him hard aside, and ran off. Bob stumbled and gasped for breath.

By the time he set off in pursuit, the intruder had already disappeared around the corner. Bob ran after him along the wall. After a few steps, the intruder was no longer to be seen or heard. Bob slowed down until he reached the gate and the car park.

The gate was ajar. Did the intruder go in there? Bob was still wondering if he should enter the estate when suddenly a figure emerged from the night behind the Range Rover. Almost immediately, Bob sensed something swinging towards him. The next moment, a bomb exploded in his head, and he slumped down.

Bob had no idea how long he had been unconscious but when excited voices woke him, he was still on the ground. He had a feeling that he hadn’t missed too much. His head lay soft and warm.

“I’ll be happy to explain again, ma’am,” that was Jupiter’s voice. “You’re mistaken. We came here from Miranda Kramer’s house because we heard the alarm. We could hardly have set it off ourselves.”

“I don’t believe a word you say,” a woman replied.

Bob opened his eyes and looked into Pete’s worried face.

“Bob, are you all right?” asked the Second Investigator.

“Sort of,” Bob groaned, straightening up from Pete’s lap and feeling an aching bump. “Have I been out long?”

Pete shook his head. “A minute at most.”

Bob stood up cautiously and looked around. Besides Pete and Jupiter, there were two other people standing just outside the gate.

There was a tall, good-looking man, perhaps in his mid-sixties, who looked at them sombrely. His face was angular and his short-shaven full beard was streaked with silver. Next to him stood a small woman whose age was hard to estimate. Her long, wavy hair was platinum blonde, but in reality, it would probably have been grey. Her face appeared unnaturally wrinkle-free, but her hands, with which she tightly gripped a wooden broom, revealed that she was much older than the plastic surgeons would have her believe. She wore a white nightgown and slippers with pink pom-poms.

“Why are you sneaking around here in the middle of the night?” the man asked, taking a threatening step closer.

“I was just trying to explain that,” Jupiter said, but he was interrupted by another man stepping through the gate at that moment.

“Hey! These are the boys I met by the road earlier tonight!”

“Dusty!” Jupiter cried with relief. “Could you please tell your housemates the reason we are here?”

“They’re three pretty nice fellows,” Dusty said. “I showed them the way here and—”

“You showed these burglars the way here?” the woman cried in horror.

“Oh, they’re definitely not burglars. Sniffer can’t stand bad people. He would have barked, wouldn’t you, Sniffer?” Dusty patted the air beside his leg.

The woman rolled her eyes.

“Besides, they’re Miranda’s guests,” Dusty added.

“Don’t make me laugh. Anyone can say that,” the woman countered. “Where is she anyway? Did you guys rob her or something?”

Before The Three Investigators could defend themselves, the tall, broad-shouldered man took a step forward and the disapproval on his face was replaced by astonishment.

“Miranda’s guests? Then you are the nephew of Titus Jones! Of course, now I recognize you! It must have been ten years ago, when you were only half my size... but you had the chubby cheeks even then.”

Pete let out a giggle.

Jupiter kept his composure and nodded. “I’m Jupiter Jones, and these are my friends Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews.”

“Barclay Ward.” His handshake was firm. “I’ve known your uncle for many, many years. Holly, you can drop your wooden weapon. These three boys are certainly not burglars. In fact, they’re investigators and they stand up for law and order, right?”

“Don’t make me laugh!” Holly snorted, not even thinking about putting her broom aside. “Barc, you’re full of hogwash! Who do you think set off the alarm if not these three fellows here?”

“I saw someone,” Bob said. “He was hiding near the wall but it was so dark, I couldn’t see him clearly. I chased him here, but then he lay in wait behind the Range Rover and knocked me down.”

Holly laughed out. “I was the one who whacked you on the head!”

Dusty looked at her, startled.

“Holly!” said Barclay sternly.

She turned to Barclay defiantly. “—And I’d do it again any time!”

“—But you didn’t crouch down on the ground behind the corner of the wall, did you?” asked Bob, who could not imagine that he had been chasing this little woman. Besides, she was dressed in white, not black.

“No. After the alarm went off, I armed myself, sneaked through the gate, and waited.”

“Then the real culprit must have passed you!” said Bob excitedly. “Didn’t you see him?”

“I only saw you!”

Barclay raised his hands placatingly. “Calm yourselves. I think the case is clear. The boys are telling the truth. Someone tried to break in here. The alarm system got us all out of bed. Bob here surprised the intruder and Holly unfortunately hit the wrong person, which I’m sure you’re sorry about, right?”

“Sorry for nothing,” Holly replied, striding back through the gate onto the property with her head held high.

“She’s sorry,” Barclay assured Bob. “She’s just a little rough.”

“It’s all right,” Bob waved it off, though he thought ‘rough’ was a shameless understatement.

“We should all go back to bed,” Barclay suggested. “Why don’t you three come over for breakfast tomorrow for us to make up for this misunderstanding?”

“We’ll do that,” Jupiter assured him. “Good night!”

The three boys turned to leave. Then the First Investigator remembered something else, and said to Barclay: “Don’t forget to switch the alarm system back on!”

“We didn’t switch it off at all,” Barclay replied. “The siren stops on its own after two minutes. The system is programmed to automatically activate itself every night and then switches off in the morning.”

“We still have to call the Oro Valley police,” Dusty interjected. “They should have received the alarm activation. We don’t want the cops showing up here for nothing.”

“Will do,” Barclay assured Dusty.

Barclay then waved goodbye to the boys, closed the gate, and walked back across the courtyard with Dusty. Meanwhile, The Three Investigators made their way back to Miranda’s house.

“—And now for you,” Jupiter said, turning to Pete.

“Yeah, I know.” The Second Investigator looked down at the ground, embarrassed. “I fell asleep. Sorry. I was just tired.”

“Then you should have left the first watch to one of us.”

“I would have fallen asleep the same way on the second or third watch,” Pete admitted candidly. “I slaved half the day in the salvage yard and then sat at the wheel for another two and a half hours. I was exhausted! At least you two rested during the drive up there.”

“That was very unprofessional of you, Pete.”

“Okay, so it was unprofessional... but it can’t be changed now.”

Jupiter wanted to say something else, but by then they had already reached Miranda Kramer’s house. She came towards them in her nightgown.

“For goodness’ sake, what’s going on there?”

It took quite a while until they had explained everything to the distraught Miranda and calmed her down. After that, they were all back in their beds. The excitement had turned into tiredness and they finally fell asleep.

6. Desert View

When The Three Investigators stepped out the door the next morning, they were almost shocked by the breathtaking view.

During the night, they hadn't been able to see how dramatically the mountains plunged into the canyon directly in front of them and then rose up like a wall on the other side. From here, the road they had travelled on was nothing more than a crumbling line teetering dangerously close to the abyss.

Towards the north, they had a fantastic view of the desert in daylight. The mountain range sloped gently downwards and merged into a stony plain of yellow and brown tones that stretched to the horizon. Far away, a dead-straight road cut through the plain land. A tiny plume of dust stuck in the air where a car had just moved. Otherwise, there were only rocks, sand, and stones.

In this vast nothingness, Desert View, with its blue swimming pool and lush green garden, seemed like a mockery of the desert.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob were on the way to their breakfast invitation. Miranda was still asleep. On the path to the front gate, they searched the ground for traces of the night's intruder, but found nothing. Just like down by the road, it was simply too stony for prints.

As they rounded the corner of the wall, Dusty was just stepping out of the gate and getting into his Range Rover. He greeted them through the rolled-down window.

"I'm going to Oro Valley to do some shopping," Dusty said, "but I'll be back in two hours, so maybe I'll see you then!"

Dusty started the engine, turned round and drove down the winding dirt track to the canyon road. The Three Investigators looked at him leaving.

Then something caught Bob's eye. "Look," he said, pointing down into the canyon. "Isn't someone standing there?"

Jupiter and Pete looked around. "Where?"

"There in the shadow of that boulder!"

Jupiter narrowed his eyes. About halfway up the slope, on one of the tight bends Dusty had just travelled along, a man-sized boulder loomed. From its shadow, a man now stepped out and marched up to the three boys. He was about in his early thirties. His dark suit was immaculate, his blond hair carefully parted, and in his hand was a leather briefcase.

By the time he reached The Three Investigators, small beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. He adjusted his tie and looked at the three of them appraisingly.

"Who are you guys?"

"Good morning, sir," Jupiter said. "We're friends of Miranda Kramer and we're here as her guests. Can we help you?"

The man laughed briefly. "Help me? No thanks. I know my way around here. You're living here at Miranda's expense, I presume?"

Jupiter rose to protest: "We do not live here, we are just—"

"Do you know that Miranda herself is living here on Miles's dime?" the man interrupted. "This just gets better and better. Every time I stop by my uncle's place, there are more and more people here. This place is like a refugee camp!"

"There's nothing wrong with that at all, Brian," said a deep voice behind them. Barclay came through the gate. He was wearing overalls covered with oil stains and was wiping his hands on an old rag.

"Mr Ward," said the man. "It's only nine o'clock! I didn't know you ever got up before twelve."

"Oh, Brian," Barclay retorted with amusement. "I don't know if life is really that much more worth living if you jump out of bed before sunrise just to wake up peace-loving people for an early breakfast."

"I'm part of the working population, Mr Ward. Apart from my business appointments, I only have this window of time to drop in to see my uncle."

"What a nice suit you're wearing again," Barclay said, amused. "Let me guess, you left your car down by the road so it wouldn't get dusty up here... but now your shoes have taken a beating." Barclay glanced down at Brian's feet, but they were in sports shoes, which didn't quite match the suit. "Oh, hold on... I see you prepared well for that and took off your Italian leather shoes in your car! You never fail to impress me."

"I want to see my uncle."

"He's not here."

"Where is he?"

"In Bermuda."

"Still?"

"He's extended his stay. Think about it Brian, maybe Miles is trying to avoid you. Before you come all this way next time, you could call him on his mobile phone."

"I did," Brian said angrily. "He didn't answer."

Barclay smiled innocently. "Funny, he answers my calls."

"You'll stop laughing one day, Mr Ward. You can count on it! Tell my uncle to call me!" Brian didn't wait for an answer, but turned on his heel and stomped angrily down the slope to the road.

Barclay watched him go with amusement before turning to The Three Investigators with a sly smile. "Good morning, boys!"

"Good morning," Jupiter replied. "Was that Miles Kendall's nephew?"

"Yeah. He's a pain in the butt. I've known him since he was little, yet he calls me Mr Ward to make it clear that he wants nothing to do with me. He's an investment adviser. For years, he had no contact with Miles at all, but now he shows up here every few weeks trying to persuade his uncle to invest his money one way or another instead of spending it. Rarely have I seen a bigger philistine... but never mind, now he's gone again. Serves him right for driving all the way out here for nothing..."

"Come on in, boys, breakfast is almost ready! I'm glad you accepted my invitation. I hope it makes up for Holly's performance last night. Have you got over the shock by now?"

"To some extent," Pete said.

"If old Titus is to be believed, you would be used to such things."

"I guess you could say that," replied Bob.

"By the way, I'm supposed to say hello to you from my uncle..." Jupiter remembered. "—And to Mr Sobek too."

"You'll meet him today, I'm sure," promised Barclay, "then you can pass on the greetings in person."

Barclay led them through the wrought-iron gate into a large courtyard loosely surrounded by two buildings and the wall. To their right stood the magnificent sandstone main house; and to their left, a flat building with a large wooden gate, presumably a garage or workshop.

Behind it was a detached two-storey building that was smaller than the main house. All around the courtyard were huge planters of agaves and cacti. At the end of the courtyard, royal palms were planted, towering over the shingle-covered pointed roofs.

They crossed the courtyard, stepped between the palm trees and reached the spacious terrace, lined with a manicured lawn and adjoined by the blue-tiled pool. Thanks to the sloping terrain, the edge of the pool at the back came almost to the top of the quarry stone wall. This provided a spectacular view of the desert from the water.

A richly laid table stood in the shade of a large parasol and several palm trees.

"I've just been working on my old Bentley and need to wash my hands," Barclay said, pointing to his overalls. "You guys go ahead and sit down, I'll bring some freshly squeezed orange juice in a minute, and then you'll tell me what drives three boys from the coast into the middle of nowhere on the edge of the desert."

"Could I use the bathroom, Mr Ward?" asked Bob.

"Sure, come on!"

Bob followed Barclay through the terrace door into a huge, elegantly furnished living room adjoining a long hallway. A telephone rang somewhere in the house.

"The bathroom is at the end of the hallway," Barclay told Bob before climbing a flight of stairs.

Bob walked down the hallway where framed black and white photographs were hanging. Some showed a small town that looked like something out of a Western. A caption read: 'Oro Valley 150 years ago'. Other pictures showed farm workers, and then there was a photo Bob had already seen from the Internet—John Dewey looking grimly at the camera, his face half hidden by his wide hat. Bob looked at it for a while. At the same time, he wondered why Barclay went up to the first floor to answer the phone call.

"Hello? ... Ah, Dr Hardwick! This is Barclay Ward... Yes, just a moment please, I'll get him on the phone."

Then Bob entered the guest bathroom. As he left it a minute later and walked back past the stairs, he heard another voice from upstairs. Bob thought he heard Dusty. Strange, hadn't he gone shopping earlier?

"That's nice of you, Carver, and it was perfectly all right to call him, but I'm fine... Yes, I know I can't take this lightly, but I can't make it to see you in the next few days. I'm gonna see a doctor in Oro Valley about the medication, okay? I know what I need now... Good. I'll see you the next time I'm in San Diego. I promise. See you then!"

The conversation ended, and footsteps could be heard. Suddenly Bob became aware that he had stopped at the foot of the stairs to listen. Quickly he went on, so as not to be caught eavesdropping.

When he stepped back outside onto the terrace, he saw that a young, very athletic looking man with black hair had entered the garden. He was wearing shorts and sports shoes, armed with a garden hose, and nodded briefly to Bob before starting to water the plants around the pool.

"There's a gardener too, of course," Bob said as he sat down at the garden table.

A short time later, Barclay returned with a tray of glasses and a carafe of freshly squeezed orange juice. He sat down with them with a flourish.

"So tell me, Jupiter!" he asked the First Investigator in a good-humoured tone. "What brings you to Miranda? She didn't tell me at all. You're not here for some investigation work, are you?"

"Actually, we are," Jupiter replied.

"Is that so? But you couldn't have known that someone would try to break into our house."

"Yes, we couldn't," Jupe assured him. "We heard the alarm over at Miranda's place. Anyway, was anything stolen last night?"

"I believe no," Barclay replied. "The alarm went off and all of us came out to check. In the first place, we have no idea what triggered it."

"You seem very relaxed about it," Bob commented.

Barclay shrugged his shoulders. "This wasn't the first attempted break-in here. It happens every few years. Desert View is an impressive estate, far from any other human habitation. It's a good place for shady characters to get ideas. However, this is a small fortress, and I feel absolutely safe here."

"—Unlike Miranda in her little house," Jupiter said. "She's seen some strange things over the last few nights and asked us to find out more. That's why we're here."

"What kind of strange things?"

"Someone is prowling around there at night," Jupiter replied evasively, "and we're wondering if you or your housemates have noticed anything unusual."

Barclay frowned sceptically. "The attempted break-in last night was unusual, of course... Beyond that... no, I didn't notice anything, and if the others had, they would have mentioned it, I'm sure. Anyway, you're welcome to ask them, of course. I just ran into Holly in the kitchen, and she'll be out in a minute. Dusty just went to Oro Valley to do some shopping. Miles is away on vacation. Dusty's granddaughter Raven got up earlier, I think, so maybe she'll be along soon."

"What about Mr Sobek?" Jupiter asked.

"Right, you can ask him as well."

Jupiter nodded.

The sound of a car engine approached. It was unmistakably Dusty's rickety Range Rover.

"Well, is Dusty back already?" wondered Barclay. "He just left ten minutes ago."

Bob, who had thought he heard Dusty on the phone earlier, frowned in confusion and was about to ask Barclay about it when Holly stepped outside through the terrace door. She was wearing her robe again and had pushed a sleep mask up her forehead. Now in the daylight, it was clear that the youthful smoothness of her cheeks and full lips were not real.

Tormented, she squinted into the sun and shielded her eyes. "Barc, what are you doing out here at the crack of dawn? Dusty is out shopping, but he left his shopping list on the kitchen table—that goofball. That's what you get for getting up so early. Anyway, I slept terribly after all that excitement last night..." Then she noticed the three boys at the table. "I see you're voluntarily opening the door to juvenile delinquents..."

"These boys are certainly not delinquents, in fact they are the opposite—they are investigators... Jupiter Jones, Titus's nephew, and his friends."

"You already told me last night that this is Titus Jones's nephew. Is that supposed to reassure me? I remember Titus. He is always collecting other people's trash and reselling it. That's not very trustworthy if you ask me, Barc."

"My uncle runs a successful salvage yard business," Jupiter corrected her in a controlled manner.

"The boys want to ask you something, Holly."

However, Holly suddenly turned all her attention to the gardener. "Manolo!" she called out to him. "Manolo, the agaves don't need so much water!" Turning to Barclay, she whispered: "We'd better start looking for a new gardener, Barc, before Manolo ruins all our plants. Did he even have references when we hired him?"

“You hired him, Holly, and his references were his washboard abs and fiery gaze,” Barclay replied dryly, not looking up from his croissant.

That comment was also ignored. Holly shielded her eyes with her hand and marched back into the house. Over her shoulder, she whispered: “Don’t complain to me if these guys clean out the place behind your back. I warned you!” Then she was gone.

“Just don’t listen to her,” Barclay advised The Three Investigators and impassively cracked open his breakfast egg. “Believe me, she doesn’t mean it. I ought to know... after all, I was married to her for seven months.”

Pete choked on his toast and coughed a few crumbs onto the table. “Excuse me,” he gasped.

“I was her third husband—out of four... but that was a while ago.”

A shrill scream made The Three Investigators and Barclay flinch.

“That is Dusty!” gasped Barclay, jumping up so fast that the chair fell over. “Something must have happened.”

Suddenly, Dusty came running around the corner of the house, his fluffy coloured trousers and half-open cotton shirt flapping. In his narrow face was plain fear.

When he saw Barclay and The Three Investigators, he ran towards them. “All of you! Into the house, quick!”

“What—”

“Quick!”

Barclay didn’t have to yell another time, because the reason for Dusty’s panic came shooting round the corner at that very next moment.

The Three Investigators widened their eyes in disbelief. Coming right at them, across the terracotta-coloured quarry tiles, was a huge crocodile in the flesh!

7. Mr Sobek

The crocodile's armoured skin was green-grey. The rows of sharp conical teeth flashed dangerously. It was about four metres long, and despite its huge body size and short stumpy legs, it moved incredibly fast!

"What... what..." Pete stammered tonelessly, not even realizing that Barclay and Dusty were already halfway to the house.

"A crocodile!" Jupiter yelled, taking cover with Bob and Pete on the other side of the garden table.

"Quick, boys, over here!" cried Barclay, who had by this time reached the terrace door. "The beast is dangerous!"

"We'll never make it!" Bob gasped, for the crocodile was already too near.

The savage beast stormed towards Barclay, but he saved himself in the house and pushed the glass door shut. A split-second later, the huge lizard crashed into the glass, which cracked. It hissed and opened its terrifying, huge mouth. Then it tried to smash the door, but its snout squeaked across the glass, leaving dusty marks. The cracks on the glass widened. Barclay backed away further and further behind the door.

"That door won't hold much longer!" Jupiter realized. "If it breaks, the beast can get into the house, and Barclay and Dusty will be trapped."

"We have to divert it!" Pete cried. "It's the only way!"

"We need a plan!" Bob suggested, as the glass door cracked again.

"No time for a plan!" Pete objected, leaving his cover behind the table and climbing onto a chair.

"Hey!" he shouted, but the crocodile didn't react. So Pete crouched down, grabbed the nearest chair and threw it in its direction. The chair hit, but it could hardly have been more than a gentle nudge for the mighty monster. It writhed its body, clamped its jaws on the chair, shook it wildly back and forth until the chair broke into pieces that flew in all directions.

Then the crocodile turned to Pete. From motionless, golden-brown speckled eyes, it gazed at the Second Investigator as if trying to assess whether this prey was as rewarding as the ones behind the glass.

For seconds, the savage beast was as frozen as if it had turned to stone. Pete didn't move either. He held his breath, fixed his gaze on the crocodile's slitted pupils, and hoped that it might forget him if he kept completely still.

Suddenly, a blue scrub jay rose from a palm tree by the pool, cawing and flapping. Pete startled and winced. The next moment, the crocodile shot towards him.

The Second Investigator jumped off the chair. One wrong move and the crocodile would get to him. Instinctively, Pete sprinted to the swimming pool and dived into it.

With two strong breaststrokes, the Second Investigator came back to the surface and turned around, treading water. By this time, the crocodile had come to the edge of the pool.

"Pete!" Juve yelled out. "What on earth are you doing? Crocodiles are excellent swimmers! Get out of there quick!"

"I know that!" Pete gasped while keeping an eye on the monster. "I'm in chlorinated water! It might not come in!"

True enough, the crocodile remained at the edge of the pool expressionless. Then it blinked and slowly opened its mouth, the inside of which shimmered peach-coloured.

Just then, the terrace door was pushed open.

“Get in here, boys!” murmured Barclay. Bob and Jupiter sprinted off, ran into the house, and Barclay pushed the door shut again.

“Hey!” cried Pete. “Now what? You can’t leave me here alone! Hey!”

The crocodile let out a snarl and it looked like it was grinning at Pete.

“Hey!” Pete yelled to the beast. “Do you think I’m drowning now and all you have to do is fish me out? Forget it, I’m a good swimmer! Go on, get out of here, you stupid lizard!”

“His name is Mr Sobek,” said a voice somewhere above him. Pete raised his head and squinted against the sun.

In a window on the first floor of the house stood a girl with long black hair. That had to be Raven, Dusty’s granddaughter. She didn’t bother elaborating, but threw something down. A palm-sized piece of raw meat slapped down on the tiles next to the crocodile. The crocodile turned and grabbed the meat, gulping it down in one piece. Raven tossed it a second chunk, a little further away, and immediately another, which landed right on the corner of the house. Mr Sobek rushed towards the second chunk of meat and ate it.

“You’re luring him away!” cried Pete, relieved.

“As soon as he’s around the corner, get out of the pool and run into the house!” she instructed him, then she was gone—presumably to continue setting the meat trail from another window.

The crocodile gobbled down the third lump of meat and Pete heard piece number four slap the ground. Mr Sobek hissed, then trotted out of sight.

The Second Investigator didn’t wait a second longer. With three powerful strokes, he had reached the edge of the pool, pushed himself out of the water, and ran to the terrace door with his wet clothes tugging at him. Barclay opened the door another time, Pete ran inside, and the door slammed shut.

The Second Investigator was oblivious to his surroundings. Dripping, he ran further into the house until he found the stairs leading up.

Bob came towards him.

“Where are you going?” gasped Pete.

“To lock up the creature! Go upstairs!” Bob called out and ran past Pete.

Pete took Bob’s advice. Once on the first floor, he quickly found the bedroom where Jupiter, Dusty, Barclay and Raven were crowded in front of an open window.

“Pete!” cried Jupiter, relieved. “You made it!”

Now Holly came running into the room as well. “For once, can you keep the noise down in here?”

“Mr Sobek is on the loose,” Barclay pointed outside.

“What?” Holly exclaimed. “Where is the monster now?”

“Almost where it belongs.” Barclay replied.

Not far from the house, a high fence surrounded an enclosure the size of a tennis court, with rocks, bushes and a large, brown pond. The gate in the fence was open and Mr Sobek was eating a piece of meat that was lying right in front of it.

Suddenly Dusty called out: “Miles has a stun gun. Anyone knows where it is?”

“Stun gun?” asked Pete hopefully.

“Miles owns one just in case,” Dusty said tersely, “but I don’t know where he keeps it.”

“Then we’ll have to lure Mr Sobek back into the enclosure,” Raven said, reaching into a plastic bag lying on the windowsill beside her.

She pulled out another piece of meat, took a swing, and threw it outside. However, the meat didn't fly far enough, hit the fence and fell onto the ground. Mr Sobek waddled away from the gate and greedily went for it.

Bob, who was now outside, took advantage of this moment of distraction and scurried from the corner of the house to a huge agave tree, behind which he hid. He looked up at the window and signalled to them that he would close the enclosure gate as soon as the crocodile was inside.

"There's only one small piece of meat left," Raven muttered grimly. "If I don't make it over the fence, then—"

"Give me that," Pete said, squeezing between Dusty and Holly and taking the last chunk out of his saviour's hand. She seemed relieved.

"For goodness' sake," Holly said. "You want to do this?"

"You're welcome to try it yourself!" retorted Pete angrily.

Holly fell silent, offended.

"That's no problem for you at all, Pete," Jupiter said encouragingly, patting him on the back.

Pete turned back to the window, focussed, took a swing and hurled the meat outside. Slippery as it was, it slipped from his fingers at the last moment, flew a far too short arc in a staggering manner and slapped onto the pavement between the house and the fence.

"I told you so!" Holly hissed at him.

Bob jumped out from his cover and ran towards the piece of meat before Mr Sobek could reach it. However, Pete saw it clearly that Bob was too slow. The crocodile would devour the last chunk first—and then Bob!

Out of nowhere, Manolo the gardener appeared on the pavement. He was armed with a garden hose, which he pointed at Mr Sobek. Suddenly a jet of water shot out of the hose and hit the crocodile right in the open mouth. The monster hissed angrily, flapped its tail wildly, felling a metre-high cactus, and backed away. Bob seized the opportunity. He reached the piece of meat and threw it over the fence.

Mr Sobek was intelligent enough to know that he had to get through the enclosure gate to get to the food. A moment later, he was inside, devouring the meat in one bite.

Bob ran to the enclosure gate and threw it shut so hard that the fence rattled. He closed the heavy-duty latch and secured it with a metal spike hanging from a chain.

Immediately, he took three steps back... but the crocodile made no further move to come at him. It was as if it had realized that its excursion was over.

Slowly it climbed onto a sunlit rock and swallowed a few more times before coming to a standstill. Only its eyes were still moving, scrutinizing Bob. The perpetual grin that seemed to wrap around its mouth made Bob shiver.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Pete felt the unreal urge to laugh and couldn't quite suppress it. Then his knees started to tremble and he had to sit down on the bed that was against the wall.

Holly reared up in front of him, thrust her hands on her hips, and shouted angrily: "Get off this property now!"

8. Thrown Out

The Three Investigators didn't immediately leave the property, but ten minutes later, they were sitting on the terrace with Barclay, Dusty, his granddaughter Raven, and Manolo, the gardener. Holly had disappeared, snorting with rage.

The three men had treated themselves to a whiskey—and then a second one. For The Three Investigators, there was Coke, which Pete had asked for. He felt he badly needed a lot of sugar to get over his state of shock. Barclay had given him a bathrobe that was a little too big, and Pete's wet clothes were placed on a portable clothes rack to dry in the sun. He was shivering and only very slowly did the sun manage to dispel his inner chill.

Dusty also seemed to be in shock. He kept stroking his goatee, pulling on his pipe, and talking soothingly to Sniffer, who was supposedly sitting next to him.

"I don't understand it," Dusty said. "I just don't understand it. How could Mr Sobek break out? It's never happened before!"

"If it wasn't for Manolo..." Barclay muttered, shaking his head and patting the gardener on the shoulder.

The young gardener smiled sheepishly and said in a heavy Mexican accent: "The boys helped! Lucky I came around the corner and saw. Can help quickly."

"You three and Raven, as well!" Barclay added. "We would never have recaptured Mr Sobek without you."

Raven didn't seem to let on that she was pleased with Barclay's praise, letting her black hair fall halfway down her face like a curtain.

"It's a Nile crocodile, isn't it?" asked Bob. "—Judging by the size, anyway."

"—And by the name," Jupiter added. "'Sobek' is the name of an Egyptian deity associated with the Nile crocodile. Why on earth would you have a such a creature in your garden?"

"It belongs to Miles," Barclay explained. "He's had Mr Sobek since it was a baby some thirty years ago, I think."

"Was he aware that importing a crocodile from Africa at that time was most likely a violation of the Washington Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species?" Jupiter asked seriously, "or did Mr Kendall have a special permit?"

Barclay shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Your questions are valid, Jupiter, but it's not my crocodile. I don't know if Miles has a permit."

"He's definitely got a stun gun in case something goes wrong," Dusty added. "I don't know where he keeps it, unfortunately."

Barclay sighed. "Mr Sobek has lived here considerably longer than I have. So what do you do with a full-grown crocodile that came here as a baby? Send it back to Africa? It probably wouldn't survive in the wild."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," Pete muttered.

"The most important question now is how it broke out," Dusty spoke up again. "The gate's secured, isn't it?"

Jupiter gave Bob a questioning look. Bob nodded. "It's a locking mechanism that the crocodile can't possibly open itself... assuming it's properly closed."

"Then either someone opened the gate," Jupiter pondered aloud, "or left it open by mistake. When was the last time the enclosure was entered?"

"Entered?" Dusty exclaimed in horror. "Never! We'll throw Mr Sobek his food over the fence!"

"Surely the enclosure must be cleaned regularly," Jupiter assumed.

"Miles does that," Barclay replied.

"When was the last time?"

Barclay shrugged his shoulders.

"At least not in the last week," Dusty stated, "because that's how long he's been in The Bahamas."

"Hmm..." Jupiter said thoughtfully. "Then someone must have released the crocodile... which means that the Miranda Kramer case could possibly extend to the whole of Desert View."

Dusty looked at him questioningly. "What does Miranda have to do with this?"

"Mrs Kramer has been threatened by an unknown person for the past few nights, presumably trying to drive her out of her house. That's why we're here. I may be wrong, but the escape of a crocodile that has lived in a secure enclosure for decades is not something I consider a coincidence at this point."

Dusty was about to ask a question, but Holly came rushing out of the house, still in her robe. "Of course it's not a coincidence! You opened the gate!"

"I beg your pardon?" Pete cried indignantly. "We didn't!"

"Who else would have done it? One of us?"

"Look! We didn't even know there was a crocodile here!" Pete argued.

"I've lived here for years and Mr Sobek has never broken out! This is happening on the very day you three show up here."

"Your suspicions seem justified at first glance," Jupiter admitted, "but we were sitting on the terrace all the time, right here at this table."

"Barc was in the kitchen squeezing oranges," Holly countered. "You three were left alone out here during that time. Now get out of here before I lose my temper."

"—But Miss Holly," Manolo said uncomfortably, "the boys helped—"

"Oh, fiddlesticks! You three rascals get out of here, and we'll have peace and quiet again!"

Dusty stood up, not looking at anyone, but just murmuring: "Come on, Sniffer, let's go for a nice walk."

"I'm coming with you!" Raven said quickly, and together they left the terrace.

"Holly..." Barclay said reassuringly.

"Holly, Holly," she mimicked him. "Get out now!"

Jupiter stood up. "Fellas, I think it's better if we go. Thanks for breakfast, Barclay. We'll check with you later."

"You can save yourselves the trouble!" Holly shouted, but The Three Investigators ignored her.

Pete hurried to his clothes and slipped into his trousers and T-shirt, although they were not fully dried. Then he laid the bathrobe over the back of the chair. Together they walked across the courtyard to the gate and left.

Wanting to talk things over in peace, they decided to take a slow walk around Desert View before returning to Miranda's house.

"What a fury," Bob muttered, shaking his head.

"Really!" Pete agreed with him. "Does she seriously think we let that monster loose?"

“Well, from her point of view, I actually understand,” Bob said. “We show up and suddenly someone tries to break in. Then today, Mr Sobek went on the loose. What else is she going to believe?”

“Her hysteria could also have been a diversionary manoeuvre,” Jupiter suggested. “Holly wasn’t necessarily in the house when Mr Sobek appeared on the terrace. She could have got out of the house through the back door and released the crocodile herself.”

Bob nodded. “It’s also possible that it was Barclay while he was pretending to make orange juice, and then Mr Sobek took a few minutes to find his way to freedom... That brings to mind something else that is odd.”

“Like what?”

“When I was going to the bathroom, the phone rang. Barclay went up the stairs to answer it. A while later, he passed the call on to someone else. I only heard this other person’s voice—but he sounded like Dusty. However, Dusty wasn’t there at all! He was on his way to Oro Valley to do some shopping.”

“—But eventually he came back,” Pete recalled.

“He did, but that was later.”

“Why was he back so soon, anyway? Wasn’t he supposed to be gone for two hours?”

“Holly said something about a shopping list he had forgotten,” Jupiter recalled. “That’s why he turned back.”

“—But he didn’t come back until after I heard him on the phone—which makes no sense.”

Jupiter frowned. “He couldn’t have been on the phone. If he had, Barclay wouldn’t have been surprised to find Dusty coming back... Could it be that Barclay is hiding something from us? We’re going to have to put a question mark on them both... and Holly too.”

“—And the gardener,” Pete added. “He first watered the agaves he wasn’t supposed to, and then... I don’t remember where he went, and from where he suddenly reappeared with his garden hose.”

Bob and Jupiter didn’t know either.

“So let’s summarize,” Bob eventually said. “Basically, they’re all suspects, including Dusty’s granddaughter Raven, because we don’t know where she was when Mr Sobek ran out onto the terrace.”

“I was in the kitchen making cereal,” a voice suddenly said.

9. Raven

In the shadow of the quarry stone wall, behind a shaggy creosote bush, Raven sat cross-legged with a notebook in her lap and a pen in her hand. She had just finished decorating a handwritten text with vines and tiny skulls. Through her curtain of hair, she looked up at them.

"Oh, we didn't see you," Pete said. "Thanks again for saving us, Raven. Who knows what would have happened if you hadn't lured Mr Sobek away."

"He would have drowned you first and then swallowed you whole... just like crocodiles do."

Pete swallowed. "Lovely."

"Anyway, I didn't let him go... and Grandpa Dusty didn't either. He'd be way too scared for Sniffer."

Pete cleared his throat.

Raven's look was withering. "Were you going to say something?"

"Well..." said Pete. "Sniffer... I mean... the dog isn't even there."

"So what? He would have been scared for him anyway."

Jupiter asked: "Who do you think released the crocodile?"

"What' is more the question."

"What do you mean by that?"

Raven leaned forward conspiratorially and murmured: "Do you know the story of John Dewey?"

"Yes, we heard of him," Jupe replied. "Are you suggesting that the ghost of John Dewey is up to mischief here?"

"I don't know if it's the ghost of John Dewey, but something's going on around here. My grandpa says so too."

"Your grandpa..." Jupiter repeated, his tone leaving no doubt as to what he thought of Dusty Kirkpatrick.

Raven crossed her arms angrily. "There are other people who observe or hear strange things. Everyone who lives in the area knows that the canyon is haunted. A few days ago, I read on the Internet that John Dewey had been spotted again. There was even a photo."

Jupiter's ears perked up. "Is that so? Do you remember where it was posted?"

"Oh?" Raven uttered snappishly, seemingly concentrating again on her doodling. "All of a sudden you're interested?"

"I'm interested because we've been hired by Miranda Kramer to find out who's been up to mischief here at night."

Raven seemed to be struggling with herself, but her need to communicate won out.

She slammed her book shut, and stood up. "Come on, I'll show you!"

"I don't know if it's such a good idea for us to go back to the house now," Bob pointed out, "especially after Holly just kicked us out."

"Oh, Holly..." Raven made a dismissive gesture. "She doesn't need to see you guys."

They walked back to the gate and entered the courtyard. From there, however, they didn't go to the terrace. Instead, they walked past the garage to the detached two-storey building.

Raven pulled open a thick, dark door and waved them in. The Three Investigators entered the cool building. Inside, the walls were unplastered, rough stone. Raven led them up a narrow, old wooden staircase to the upper floor.

There lay her room. It was large and had windows on three sides. Considering that she was only here for a visit, she had managed to make her mark on the otherwise bare and unadorned room. Posters of gothic bands and large black and white pictures of gloomy churches, desert cemeteries, and rattlesnakes hung on the walls. Candles were scattered all over the room. In one corner of the room was her guitar.

Raven sat cross-legged on the bed, grabbed her laptop from her desk, and switched it on.

"Do you live here all by yourself?" asked Bob.

Raven nodded. "This is the guest house. Grandpa Dusty wanted me to stay with him and the others in the big house, but I wasn't up for that. It's cooler here. The others don't come here so I can work in peace."

"What kind of work do you do?" Bob asked.

"I write songs... and poems," Raven said. "Here, I've got the page!" Raven took the laptop from her lap and placed it on the bed. Against the background image of an old, creepy-looking house, all sorts of information about hauntings, ghostly apparitions and monster sightings was presented.

"Doesn't look very serious," Bob remarked doubtfully.

"That's not what it's all about now," Raven rebuffed indignantly, and clicked on the 'Forum' tab. Under 'Sightings in California', there was a whole list of places and names—including Dead Man's Canyon. There were already a number of entries there.

"Here," Raven said, clicking on an entry. A short text and a photo appeared.

Jupiter read out the comment:

"I was driving my car at night and suddenly saw this figure standing by the side of the road. I stopped. Luckily I had my camera with me. I took the photo and a moment later, the man vanished into thin air."

It was posted by someone called 'moonchild66'... and another reader 'Robert' added a comment:

"I wouldn't hang around there anymore if I were you. It is said that anyone who sees the ghost of John Dewey three times is doomed to die."

Jupiter kept scrolling until the image was visible. A small and blurry night shot showed a dark figure standing somewhere on the side of the road, looking towards the viewer. He was wearing dark pants with suspenders and a light-coloured shirt. The face could not be seen clearly as it was covered by a large hat.

Pete gasped. "That's him! One hundred percent!"

Raven frowned. "Who?"

"Well, the guy I saw last night!"

"You saw him?"

Pete nodded. "By the road... just before I crashed my car into a cactus. See, Juve, I told you so!"

Jupiter rolled his eyes. "I never doubted that you saw someone, Pete. I'm merely saying that it wasn't a ghost..."

"—But he vanished into thin air, Juve!" Pete tapped the Internet comment. "—And what about Miranda? How many times has she seen John Dewey? Twice? Or even three times?"

We really need to warn her!”

“Miranda saw him too?” exclaimed Raven. “Was that what you were talking about on the terrace earlier? That someone was prowling around here? You mean John Dewey? Great, but to me you act like it’s all not true.” Raven crossed her arms angrily.

Jupiter sighed. “This photo, together with what Pete saw and Miranda told us, only suggests that someone is walking around here at night with a hat on—nothing more. I don’t believe for a second that he disappeared into thin air. Nonetheless, this is of course an interesting entry. Perhaps we can contact ‘moonchild66’ and ask him or her exactly when and where the photo was taken. By the way, when was this entry posted?”

However, Raven angrily pulled the laptop away from Jupiter and flipped it shut. “You guys are idiots. First you want me to help you, and then you don’t want to know the truth.”

“Raven, what truth are you talking about?”

“That John Dewey is up to no good here!”

“I can prove you wrong,” Jupiter asserted.

However Raven wasn’t getting into anything more. “Do what you want, and leave me out of it! Goodbye.”

Bob and Pete tried to smile apologetically, but Raven didn’t even look at them. So The Three Investigators left the guest house without a word and walked back out across the courtyard. When they reached the small car park, Jupiter looked at his watch.

“It’s not even noon yet, but there’s enough time.”

“Enough time for what?” Bob asked.

“To get the proof I need that this John Dewey ghost is a hoax,” Juve said.

“What are you gonna do?” Bob asked.

“Pete, you drive me back to Rocky Beach and I’ll get the proof within the next three hours that we’re not dealing with a ghost.”

“You want me to drive all the way back so that you can get some sort of proof?” Pete huffed.

“Yes.”

“What do I get if you can’t come up with the proof?”

“I’ll do all your lawn mowing jobs for a week.”

“For two weeks.”

“Two, for all I care.”

“Agreed,” Pete said, grinning triumphantly, “because you’ll never make it... and do you know why? Because it’ll take us at least two and a half hours just to get back to Rocky Beach.”

“We’ll see,” Jupiter replied calmly. “It’s not only about getting the proof, as I also want to get some equipment from Headquarters so that we can proceed with the case.”

“What about me?” asked Bob.

“Someone should stay here and keep an eye on Desert View,” Jupiter said. “In addition, I’ve got a few tasks for you, Bob... but do me a favour—don’t tell Miranda about this Internet post. If she finds out that she’s doomed to die after seeing John Dewey three times, she might go crazy.”

“Suppose if it were really so...” said Pete timidly, but Jupiter cut him off with a wave of his hand.

“Three hours... then we’ll talk more.”

10. Revealing Footwear

After Jupiter and Pete had left, Bob turned his attention to his mission to explore the area around Desert View.

He looked for tracks and possible hiding places. He went down to the road and looked at the dead tree where John Dewey had been hanged, but there was nothing of interest to be found. Bob had no luck around the squashed cactus either. There was nothing here but agaves, shrubs, and rocks. After two hours, he had scouted a wide area without finding anything more than a few old cigarette butts.

Exhausted and thirsty, he made his way back. However at the Joshua tree, where the path to Miranda's house branched off, he stopped.

The quarry stone wall that surrounded Desert View was everywhere too high to see over, but a short distance away, Bob saw a huge rock next to the wall. He climbed up and managed to get a good view of Miranda's house. More so, he could now peer over the top of the wall into Desert View.

Directly on the other side was the crocodile enclosure with rocks, a large shady tree, and the pond in the centre. Further, outside the enclosure was the side of the main house from which Pete had thrown the last bait to Mr Sobek. Here, all was quiet, with no one seen at the windows. The terrace and the pool were on the other side of the house, but not visible from here.

Bob noticed that the width of the top of the wall was wide enough for him to stand on. Could he dare climb up there to get a better view? In fact, he could even walk along the top of the wall past the crocodile enclosure to the swimming pool and beyond.

He hesitated. Not only because of the crocodile, but because of the alarm system... Then he recalled Barclay saying that the system was automatically switched off during the day.

Bob gripped the top edge of the wall, sought a safe foothold with his right foot in the many gaps between the stones, and pulled himself up. Yes, there was no alarm. Kneeling, he stabilized himself on the top of the wall.

Suddenly Bob had a scary thought. If he were a burglar climbing up here and dropping to the other side, not knowing that it was the crocodile enclosure, that would be the end. He shook off that thought immediately.

Mr Sobek was nowhere to be seen at first, but then the surface of the pool rippled and the crocodile, which had been under water except for its eyes and nostrils, surfaced, went ashore and looked up at Bob. Slowly it opened its huge maw and froze.

"Don't worry, little lizard, I won't hurt you," Bob murmured, trying hard to sound reassuring. He looked at the ground. The crocodile enclosure was not as rocky as the landscape around the estate—it was more sandy. The tracks that Mr Sobek had left everywhere with his claws and tail were clearly visible.

It was not just those, as Bob spotted the prints of sports shoes. He pulled his camera out of his pocket, zoomed in on a well-preserved print and snapped it. Then he took photos of the rest of the enclosure.

Suddenly he heard voices. They came from the direction of the terrace. Bob listened, but could only make out that it was Barclay and Holly talking to each other. He climbed back

down onto the rock. Then he crept along the outside of the wall until he came to the spot beside the creosote bush where Raven had been sitting that morning. From here, he could hear what was being said.

“... Last night and this morning,” Holly said, “it was just too much.”

“That wasn’t even all,” Barclay said hesitantly.

“Good gracious, what else?”

“Brian was here earlier today.”

“When exactly?” Holly asked in alarm.

“At the same time when the three boys came for breakfast. You were still asleep.”

“Why was he here?”

“To see Miles, of course. He didn’t tell me anything specific, but what could it have been about? Obviously the same old money issues.”

“So?”

“I told him that Miles wasn’t back yet. A little while later, Carver Hardwick called.”

“What did he want?” Holly asked.

“Just to enquire about his patient’s health.”

Holly sighed. “First Brian Kendall, then Carver Hardwick... this is not going well, Barc.”

“Calm down, Holly,” Barclay said unexpectedly gently. “Everything will work out.”

“What if it doesn’t? We need a solution.”

“We can’t go back on what we have decided. Dr Hardwick can call as often as he likes. As for Brian, the fact that he’s constantly pestering his uncle at the moment is just a phase that will eventually pass. He might just lose interest at some point. After all, he didn’t care for Miles before.”

“I don’t know, Barc. There’s just too much going on here for me. Those three guys at Miranda’s—”

“They have to go back to school on Monday, and besides, they’re harmless.”

“What about the attempted break-in last night and Mr Sobek’s escape...”

“It’s very strange, yes, but who knows, maybe the boys can actually solve this case. That wouldn’t be bad, would it?”

“So you think they have nothing to do with it?”

“I just can’t imagine it. Titus Jones thinks so highly of the three of them.”

“I don’t like them,” Holly said. “Sneaking around here day and night. Earlier I saw from the window, the small one was roaming around the estate. You feel like you’re always being watched and eavesdropped on... and then there are those scare stories about Miranda being threatened. Are they serious?”

“It looks that way. I don’t know what’s behind that, Holly... but whatever Miranda’s making up in her house doesn’t need to concern us.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Just then, footsteps approached on the other side of the wall. They were squeaky footsteps of rubber soles.

“I’m done now, Miss Holly,” said Manolo the gardener.

“Well, Manolo, see you next week!” replied Holly wearily. Chairs were moved. “I’m going to lie down for an hour, Barc.”

Bob heard Holly go into the house. The squeaky footsteps also moved away. Just then, Bob realized that such squeaky footsteps could also come from new shoes.

Pete glanced at the clock on the dashboard as they passed the Rocky Beach city limit sign. "You've got nineteen minutes left, Jupe."

"Nineteen minutes is more than enough," the First Investigator replied calmly.

"You haven't said a word about John Dewey so far. Instead, you've been twiddling the radio incessantly and letting me drive."

"You observed that correctly, Pete."

They reached the salvage yard and Pete drove onto the premises. "Fifteen minutes," the Second Investigator remarked as they got out.

However, Jupiter did not get to respond for at that moment, his uncle Titus came out from the yard office and headed towards them. "Jupe! Pete! You're back already? Weren't you going to come back on Sunday?"

"We're going back there again," Jupiter said. "We just have to run an errand here."

"Have you visited my old friend Barclay yet?"

"We have," Pete replied. "Him and Mr Sobek."

Titus Jones laughed heartily. "What a lovely creature!"

"For sure," Jupiter replied, "as long as that monster is behind bars." He then told his uncle about the crocodile's escape.

Uncle Titus was shocked. "I'm glad nothing happened to you! How could this have happened? What did Miles say about it? Surely he must have been furious."

"Miles isn't there at all," Jupiter replied.

Uncle Titus shook his head disapprovingly. "That's just like him. At least Barclay could look after the crocodile if he's not doing anything else."

Jupiter didn't understand. "What do you mean?"

"Well, Barclay and the others are making a lukewarm living up there at Miles's expense. Looking after Mr Sobek in return while their patron is away isn't too much to ask, is it?"

Jupiter remembered what Brian had said about the living arrangements at Desert View. "Barclay and the others don't pay rent, do they?"

"Rent?" Uncle Titus laughed. "On what?"

"I don't know," Jupiter confessed. "We haven't even got round to asking the three of them what they do for a living."

"Not much would have come of it," replied Uncle Titus. "Barclay sold tickets in the circus when he was a young chap. That's how I know him. After that he tried his hand at acting, but could only get a few roles in commercials. He also did comedy once, impersonating politicians and stuff."

"Holly was a singer, or... would have liked to be one, but really, she only had a small part in a musical once... and Dusty... I don't know, he's the one I know the least, but I think he was usually busy finding odd things to do."

"They all got by somehow, and that works for an amazingly long time when you're young... but at some point, it just didn't. Barclay didn't get any more roles, Holly's singing didn't get any better with age, and so they all gradually moved in with Miles, who has let them live at Desert View and spend his money ever since. He actually gave Barclay that old Bentley as a present... and probably paid for Holly to have a plastic surgery or two."

"It didn't help much," Pete muttered.

"So Miles has money," Jupiter remarked. "Lots of money."

Uncle Titus nodded. "He's very different from his friends. He's always setting up software companies of some sort, which he then sold for incredible sums of money, and used the money to start up new companies. He's a real businessman. That's why he can afford to feed a few old friends. That's all right, I suppose."

“Anyway, I used to be on the road with Barclay and the others myself. Who knows what would have happened to me if I hadn’t started this salvage yard. I just think that if you’re not going to pay anything for a huge house in the mountains and a fridge that’s always full, you can at least make sure that the crocodile stays in its enclosure, right?”

Jupiter nodded thoughtfully. “There’s someone who doesn’t like it at all that Miles’s friends live at Desert View—his nephew Brian. Do you happen to know him?”

Uncle Titus shook his head. “Not personally, but I’ve heard of him. No wonder he doesn’t like it. Brian is Miles’s next of kin, and will inherit everything one day. Naturally, he wants something there left for him.” Uncle Titus laughed. “It looks like Miles is more keen on spending his money while he still can. He’s really enjoying himself now... and why not? I’m happy for him.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jupiter noticed two women fumbling around with some vases. “Customers, Uncle Titus.”

“I’ll go attend to them.” Uncle Titus went off to the two women while Jupiter and Pete scurried to their headquarters.

Headquarters was an old mobile home trailer hidden under a massive pile of junk and scrap metal. Seemingly placed randomly in the pile was a large unused refrigerator known as the ‘Cold Gate’. The interior was modified such that the back could be slid open to reveal a short dark tunnel that led to the trailer. Inside the trailer was dark, untidy, chaotic, and always a little musty. This was simply the cosiest place in the world—for The Three Investigators, of course.

Pete immediately dropped into an armchair, looked at his watch, and said: “Nine minutes.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jupiter replied, sitting down at the desk and turning on the computer. He went to the Internet, called up the page where Raven had shown them the photo, and downloaded it. Then he launched another program.

“What are you doing now?” Pete asked.

“I’m going to use an image editing program to get a better look at the John Dewey photo.”

Jupiter opened the photo with the program and began adjusting the contrast, colours, and brightness with various sliders. Pete watched him from his chair.

The shadowy figure, which barely stood out against the night background, became brighter and paler, the black turning grey and blue, revealing more and more details. The more Jupiter modified the image, the more contours emerged from the dark surroundings—rocks, bushes, the road—and finally something Pete hadn’t expected.

The Second Investigator stood up and stepped closer to the computer monitor in disbelief, while Jupiter clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back in satisfaction. “Who knew that the ghost of John Dewey wore modern sports shoes?”

Pete gulped. Not only were the shoes themselves clearly visible, but so was the brand logo. “Those are actually sports shoes.”

“It has to be roughly a hundred years after John Dewey’s death before such shoes were even available.” Jupe added.

Pete was stunned into silence. “Do you really think I have a dent in my car because of a guy in sports shoes?”

“We’ll find out.” With a few clicks of the mouse, Jupiter once again returned to the page where the photo had been posted. He quickly found what he was looking for. “Look at the date the entry was made,” he told Pete, tapping the screen.

Pete raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Now that’s a thing.”

“—And the comment from the user named ‘Robert’ came just a few hours later.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’ll explain it to you on the way back.”

11. Miranda Decides to Leave

On the way back to Miranda's house, Bob was still so lost in thought about the overheard conversation that he didn't lift his eyes until he was almost there.

On the verandah, Miranda sat with a cup of coffee in her hand and Raven with her laptop on her lap—both with concerned looks on their faces. It didn't take Bob long to realize what was going on.

"Bob, do you know what Raven just told me?"

"I can guess."

"John Dewey really does exist! I'm not the only one who has seen him... and anyone who sees him three times..." Miranda faltered.

"I had to warn Miranda," Raven justified herself. "After all, her life is in danger!"

Bob was about to protest, but Miranda got in his way. "I'm grateful to Raven for showing me that, and she also told me about the crocodile this morning. That's terrible! If I had been there... I don't even want to think about it. That's why I've made a decision. I can't stay here. I'll go to my sister's place today. It's not a permanent solution, but I'll be safe there for now... and then I'll see what happens."

"Miranda..." Bob began.

"I'll quickly pack up some things," Miranda got up and went into the house.

"Don't look at me so reproachfully," Raven said belligerently. "You would have kept all this from her, wouldn't you? It was her right to know about Mr Sobek and the Internet entry."

Bob sighed. "Raven, we're here to solve this case—not to make matters worse."

Raven flipped the laptop shut, stood up, and walked down the three steps to Bob. "No one's stopping you from doing that, but you can't put your customers' lives in danger in the process!"

"Clients, not customers," Bob corrected her carefully.

"I don't care. Miranda will be safe for now. That's the only thing that matters." With that, she walked past Bob and made her way back to Desert View—not even looking back once.

Bob sighed. Then he heard noises as Miranda started packing her things. He didn't get the feeling that Miranda was open to suggestions anymore. If he was going to convince her not to leave, he would have to come up with something else.

Bob's gaze wandered across the front of the house. Jupiter had asked him to figure out how to make footstep sounds without walking around the verandah. Was there perhaps a hidden speaker somewhere? He examined the beams that held up the slanted roof; the railing; and the metal ring door knocker. Nowhere did he find anything suspicious.

He then took a closer look at the verandah flooring which was constructed with nailed-down wooden boards. Many of the boards were old, worn out, and had gaps between them. Since the floor was raised, underneath it would be a space. He squatted down to examine the gaps between the boards and he found that some boards were loose and he could move them, albeit only a few millimetres. The supposedly rusted nail was just a broken-off nail head stuck in the wood.

Bob tried to pry out a board but the gap was too small for him to do so. He then went to the edge of the verandah and tried to lift the boards there... and suddenly he had one in his

hand. He switched on his flashlight and shone through the opening. The space underneath the floor was about 60 centimetres deep.

Bob managed to remove two more adjacent boards to reveal an opening that was just wide enough for a small person to squeeze through. He stuck his head through the opening and using his flashlight, he realized that he could crawl under the entire length of the verandah.

A moment later, Bob was crouching under the floor. From here, he could have easily fitted the three boards back in place such that nobody would know that he was there.

Under the floor, besides dust, stones, and Miranda's cigarette butts that had fallen through the gaps, there was a pair of old boots that was almost falling apart except for the thick, heavy sole. It looked like someone had fished it out of the trash.

Now, Bob knew how the footstep sounds were made and he was eager to test it out. He turned and lay on his back, and then slipped the boots over his hands. Next, he tapped the boots against the boards from underneath. After a while, he got the hang of it and it really sounded like someone was walking across the verandah.

Suddenly, a startled cry made Bob cringe. He heard frantic footsteps, and someone ran outside the house.

"Heeelp!" Miranda Kramer cried, and Bob hurriedly crawled out from his hiding-place.

There was sheer terror in Miranda's eyes. "Bob, thank goodness! Did you hear that? The footsteps! I heard them again—in broad daylight! I must get away at once!"

"Calm down, Miranda," Bob said urgently. "I didn't just hear the footsteps—I made them... with these." He showed her the boots.

"What? How? But..."

"Please, Miranda, there's no need to panic. Sit down and I will explain."

It took a while before Miranda was ready to listen to Bob. With her watching, he slipped back under the verandah and did the footstep demonstration with the boots.

"That's exactly how someone created the footsteps under your verandah," Bob explained.

He then showed her how easily he could fit the three boards back in place and nobody would have noticed someone hiding underneath the verandah.

"—And that's why you couldn't see anyone from the window," Bob continued. "I'll bet that also solves the mystery of the smashed window. Immediately after the smashing, the perpetrator hid under the verandah. We were out here a few seconds later but saw no one."

"It really could have been like that," Miranda admitted after a long hesitation, sitting down on the steps and rolling a cigarette. "What about that figure I saw twice?"

"Jupe and Pete are in the process of solving that mystery. I think we'll know more when they get back."

"If you're really right, then who's behind this? And why? Why am I being targeted?"

"Perhaps not only you," Bob reflected. "For instance, Mr Sobek's escape this morning was not directed at you."

"Maybe that was for you three," Miranda said. "Someone is trying to drive you away... to keep you from solving the mystery."

Miranda's expression had changed. Fear had gradually given way to a certain determination. Bob got the impression that Miranda too, really wanted to know what was going on at Desert View. As it was, he was pretty sure she wasn't going to leave.

Jupiter and Pete had returned half an hour ago. Now The Three Investigators sat on a rock on the hillside and exchanged news while the sun set and made the desert glow red.

"I was going to check the garden for Manolo's shoe prints to compare with those in the enclosure," Bob finished his report. "—But I would have had to enter the property to do that, and I didn't want to run into Holly."

"Speaking of shoes," Pete said, "do you remember what brand Manolo wore? Was it this one by any chance?" Pete tapped on the website photo that they had printed out at Headquarters. "—Because Jupe and I don't remember."

However, Bob had no recollection of it either.

"Still, we've made some progress today," Jupiter stated. "The conversation between Barclay and Holly that you overheard, for example, suggests that the two of them have nothing to do with the incidents."

"—Unless one is fooling the other," Bob said. "Barclay could be the culprit and Holly doesn't know... or the other way around... but either way, they're both worried about a whole bunch of things—about the attempted break-in last night; about Mr Sobek's escape; and about us. Holly was also worried about Miles Kendall's nephew Brian, and about Dr Hardwick, who called this morning. Unfortunately, I couldn't find out why."

Jupiter thoughtfully pinched his lower lip.

"Does any of this matter?" asked Pete. "Whatever Barclay and Holly are worried about has nothing to do with our case. All we care about is who has been sneaking around here at night disguised as John Dewey, and Jupe has a theory about that."

"That's true, Pete," Jupiter admitted, "but even so, the overheard conversation puzzles me... Even if I think I know who's under John Dewey's hat, the answer to the question of why is still a complete mystery to me... I'm beginning to wonder if there is a lot more to this than we already know... and that's exactly why we need to catch John Dewey in the act tonight—so he can answer our questions."

12. To Catch a Ghost

As the lights gradually went out at Desert View, Miranda Kramer and The Three Investigators went to the guest room.

Miranda had decided to stay, and had since been intrigued by the idea of solving the mystery along with The Three Investigators. So, in the dark, she helped them build a dummy out of blankets and pillows which they hoped looked like a person standing guard at the window as seen from outside of the house. Then they lit a candle and opened the window. The slight breeze was supposed to keep the candle flame moving, which in turn made the shadows flicker and the dummy look more real.

“Besides, the candle has burned down quite a bit,” Jupiter explained quietly. “It will go out in about an hour. When John Dewey sees this, and hopefully thinks that nothing else in the house is moving, he’ll assume that we’ve gone to sleep.”

One by one, they switched off all the lights in the house until only the candle was left burning. The kitchen was in darkness as Miranda sat down on the bench and said: “I’ll wait for you here until you get back safely.”

“Remember the footsteps on the verandah,” said Bob. “It wasn’t made by a ghost, but by old boots... so there’s no reason to be afraid.”

Miranda nodded. The Three Investigators pulled on their black hoodies and stowed their walkie-talkies in their pockets. Pete and Jupiter had brought these communication devices with them from Rocky Beach.

Pete opened the small window that led out the back and climbed through. “Now you!”

Jupiter did his best, but what had looked so easy and elegant for Pete presented him with unexpected problems. Only with his friends’ help—one pushing, the other pulling—was he able to squeeze through the narrow window.

“Follow me!” whispered Bob, when they were all outside. Crouching down, they crept out into the night.

They made a wide arc and headed for the huge rock next to the quarry stone wall, from where they had a good view of both one side of Desert View and Miranda’s house. Here, Jupiter took up his position.

Bob and Pete scurried together to the car park—the best observation post for the gate and the dirt track. Pete crouched down between the cars.

Bob crept on, up the ridge on the other side of Desert View. He reached a point where he could make out Miranda’s house as a dark shadow on the opposite slope. The candle they had placed in the window flickered like a dying will-o’-the-wisp.

Bob sat down on the ground, turned on the walkie-talkie, but kept the volume low. It was so quiet up here that he felt as if every little sound carried a long way.

Quietly he spoke into the device. “This is Third, I’ve reached my position. All quiet so far. Over.”

“Second here,” Pete’s voice squawked from the speaker. “All quiet here as well. Over.”

“First here. Everything’s fine where I am. The connection is good. From now on, report every ten minutes or when something happens, otherwise silence please! Over.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” said Pete.

... And there was silence. The static was barely audible, with only the occasional soft crackle from the walkie-talkie. Bob made himself as comfortable as he could, and waited.

After twenty minutes, Bob heard the sound of a rolling stone some distance away. He straightened up and tried to look into the darkness, but he saw nothing.

Were those footsteps? Yes, definitely. Someone was walking up the slope. It was already too late to warn the others. Whoever was approaching would have heard Bob so he switched off the walkie-talkie and crouched down.

He saw a shadowy figure heading straight for his hiding place. Bob did not dare to breathe. The figure passed him a few metres away. By stature and gait, Bob recognized that it was a man... and he was wearing a cowboy hat.

Soon Bob could no longer see the intruder. He had to follow him while the man was still within earshot. Bob left his hiding place and crept after him. Sand and stones crunched softly under his feet.

Where was the intruder now?

Bob crouched down with a pounding heart and listened, but all remained quiet. He counted slowly to fifty. Then he switched on the walkie-talkie and whispered: "This is Third, we have a problem!"

"Second here, what's the problem?"

"There was someone, a man. I followed him... but then I lost him because it's so darn dark. He was heading towards Desert View. You've got to watch out! Over."

"Did you recognize him?" Jupiter asked.

"No. I'm trying to find him now. No talking, please! Over!"

Bob decided to walk in the direction of Miranda's house. He had gone twenty metres when suddenly he stepped on something soft—something soft and alive that gasped in pain.

Bob took a leap to the side. The man, who must have been lying flat on the ground, rose up and gave Bob a shove. Bob staggered back, stumbled, fell. Then a sharp pain shot through his body and took his breath away. When he had air in his lungs again, he screamed as loud as he could.

When the scream rang through the night, Pete bit his tongue in shock. A second later, he grabbed his walkie-talkie and frantically said: "For goodness' sake, Bob, was that you? What's happened? Bob! Answer me!"

However, it was Jupiter who spoke up: "Something's happened, Pete! You're closer, run and find Bob!"

"Okay!" Pete jumped up from his hiding place between the parked cars and ran along the wall, past the gate and on to the next corner, around which Bob had to be somewhere.

He only saw a dark figure with a hat a split-second before he collided with it and stumbled to the ground. The Second Investigator tried to reach for the intruder, but he was faster and staggered on.

In the scuffle, Pete's walkie-talkie dropped and it took him a moment to retrieve it. Then he chased after the intruder, who ran cross-country down the slope.

"I found the guy, but he's getting away!" Pete gasped into the walkie-talkie.

"Where is he heading?" Jupiter asked.

"Down to the road."

"Get to your car and go after him!"

"By car?"

"He's unlikely to be here on foot, so his car is probably parked down there somewhere. He'll give you the slip if you don't follow him by car! I'll look for Bob!"

Pete changed direction and ran back to the car park. Luckily he had his car key with him. He swung into his MG, started the engine and had the headlights cut through the darkness. The next moment, he was driving down the winding dirt track to the canyon road.

“Second to First, I’m on the canyon road now. I can’t see that guy, but he should have seen my car. What now?”

“Drive towards Oro Valley and find a dark place to stop. Switch off your lights, and wait. The guy will think you’re driving off on a wild goose chase and hopefully, he’ll come up behind you eventually.”

“What if he goes the opposite direction?”

“I don’t think so as it’s just desert. So if a car passes you, you follow it at a safe distance. Now get going, or it’ll be too conspicuous!”

“All right!”

Pete put the walkie-talkie on the passenger seat and turned right into Dead Man’s Canyon. He drove for two minutes, then found a spot on a curve that was hard to see and overgrown with bushes. He pulled off the road, drove behind some bushes, switched off the engine, and waited.

“I’m in position now,” he said into the walkie-talkie, but there was no response. Only then, he realized that the devices didn’t have much range.

Pete didn’t have to wait long. After only a few minutes, he heard a car and saw headlights gliding over the rock faces of the canyon. The car, a green Toyota, drove past him in the direction of Oro Valley. Pete took three deep breaths, and then took off in pursuit.

“Ouch! Watch it!”

“Yelping repeatedly is not going to relieve your pain, Bob.”

“It just hurts!” Bob cried. “You could at least try to gently pull the spikes out.”

“Spines, Bob, cacti have spines, not spikes.”

“Right now, I don’t care what they are called,” Bob retaliated. “Just pull them out carefully!”

“I’ll try... very carefully and very slowly... Here you go...”

However, that actually only made it worse. “Aaaargh! Okay, the next one quickly, please.”

... And so, on the outside of the Desert View wall, and by the light of his flashlight, Jupiter continued to pull spine after spine from Bob’s shoulder and upper arm. He was halfway there already.

“Why did you have to fall into a cactus?”

“Very funny, Juve, like I chose to do that,” Bob hissed through clenched teeth. “What are we going to do about Pete?”

“There’s nothing we can do. Let’s hope his mission is successful. Meanwhile, we have to get back to Miranda. She’ll be worried.”

The drive down the canyon road took twenty minutes. It seemed like an eternity to Pete and he was glad when he was finally out of the canyon. He had kept as much distance as possible so the fugitive wouldn’t see him in the rear-view mirror. Fortunately, there was no traffic on the road towards Oro Valley at this time of the night, so Pete could always see the red tail lights of the Toyota.

Five minutes later, he reached the small desert town. Pete followed the car until it turned into a side street. The Second Investigator switched off his headlights and continued

following.

A little later, the car stopped in front of a simple house. A good distance away, Pete parked his MG at the side of the dimly-lit street, got out and crept closer to the house.

There stood the green Toyota. Behind the windows of the two-storey house, everything was dark.

Suddenly, Pete saw movement in a tree that stood alone in the withered front yard. The Second Investigator ducked behind the Toyota. The man he was chasing had climbed up the tree and was now swinging from it onto the small roof that overhung the verandah. He ran up to an open window and climbed in with a practised, fluid movement. Shortly afterwards, a dim light came on behind the window.

Everything was quiet in the area. As Pete was about to leave his cover, his eyes fell through the side window of the green Toyota. On the passenger seat lay John Dewey's cowboy hat.

Pete went to the letterbox by the road. On it was the name 'Ortega'. Again he peered at the lighted window. Behind it, all was quiet.

The Second Investigator crept to the tree and climbed up. It was easier than he had expected. Soon he had reached the roof and managed to climb onto it almost silently.

Crouching, he crept up to the still-open window and listened. He heard footsteps, then a creaking chair... and the clatter of a computer keyboard. Pete ventured a look inside.

In a small room full of posters, mountains of clothes and magazines, someone was sitting at an untidy desk staring at a computer monitor. Pete could only see him from the side, but now he could get an idea on whom he had been following all this time.

It was a boy, a little younger than himself, black-haired and a little pimply. He had a good head of hair, and nothing about him looked threatening. On the monitor, Pete recognized the interface of a video chat site. The boy clicked one of his contacts and waited for a response.

Shortly, a window popped open and a face appeared.

"Hi Robert, you're back already? How did it go?"

"It didn't go well at all," the boy named Robert replied breathlessly. He was completely beside himself. "They were lying in wait and almost followed me! I just managed to get away, but it was really close. For a while, I even thought they were chasing me in a car. Anyway, I never made it to Miranda's house.

"You know what? I'm not doing this anymore. One of these days my parents are gonna catch me sneaking out in the middle of the night. If my dad finds out I'm taking his car and driving around without a licence, he'll freak out! I'm getting out. I don't need your money that badly."

"You can't do that. You promised me! You said you'd help me!"

However, all the pleading did not help. Pete hardly registered the conversation as he was slowly shifting his position to get a better look at the face on the monitor. Finally, he saw whom Robert was talking to.

So Jupe had been right...

13. Where is Miles Kendall?

“Say, are you crazy? It’s the middle of the night!”

Raven looked out her window and down over the quarry stone wall where The Three Investigators stood, calling attention to themselves with little pebbles thrown at the window pane.

“You’re still awake?” Pete murmured back.

Raven was about to retort something, but Jupiter interrupted her: “We need to have a serious word with you, Raven. Let us in!”

“I’m not letting you in!”

“We know who’s behind the haunting of Miranda Kramer.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Let us in and we’ll explain.”

“If not, what are you gonna do?”

“Then we climb over the wall, set off the alarm, and report the results of our investigation to your grandfather, Barclay, and Holly. We’ll go to the gate now, you can let us in there.”

Jupiter didn’t let Raven get another word in edgewise, but simply walked away. Pete and Bob followed him.

They waited at the gate for a few minutes. Pete thought Raven would leave them there, but finally it was opened from the inside.

“You’re out of your minds,” she whispered indignantly, but she still let them in. “Be quiet!”

They followed her into the guest house. Candles were burning in Raven’s room. When she had closed the door behind her, she reared up angrily in front of them. “What’s this all about?”

“Don’t act as if you don’t know, Raven. You are responsible for the haunting,” Pete said, “and you put your friend Robert up to it.”

“Oh yeah? What proof—”

“You were chatting with him earlier, Raven,” Pete interrupted her. “I saw you with my own eyes.”

Raven froze.

“Let me guess,” Jupiter said. “You’re ‘moonchild66’. You posted the John Dewey photo on that website and your friend Robert commented on it. He probably also posed by the side of the road for you to take the photo—last night. Then suddenly a car came up the canyon. The headlights caught Robert and in fright the driver went off the road and crashed into a cactus. The three of us were in the car. Then you quickly hid.”

“You guys are talking total rubbish,” Raven said.

“This morning, you claimed that you discovered the photo on the website a few days ago,” Jupiter continued. “When I wanted to check the posting date, you pulled your laptop away. Later, I went to the website and found that the photo had only been online for a few hours at the time you showed us. It was all probably good for making the John Dewey story more believable and putting further pressure on Miranda. ‘... Anyone who sees the ghost of John Dewey three times is doomed to die.’ You knew that would send Miranda running.”

"After all, the footsteps on the verandah weren't enough to drive her away," Bob now spoke up. "Neither was the smashed window. Was it you or Robert hiding under the verandah?"

Raven said no more. She had her arms crossed and was staring hostilely at The Three Investigators through the curtain of black hair.

"Why, Raven?" asked Jupiter. "Why do you want to terrify Miranda Kramer?"

She remained silent.

"Speak up now!" demanded Pete angrily.

"Out!" she said softly.

"What do you mean 'out'?"

This time she yelled: "Get out! I said get out! Get out now!" She took two quick steps towards Jupiter and shoved him so hard that he staggered against the wall.

"You're out of your mind..."

Raven ran to the window, pushed open the wooden shutters, and shrieked like a banshee.

"Raven!" Pete cried, startled. He then came up behind her and tried to pull her away from the window. Over her head, he saw Holly's nightgown-clad figure appear across in the main house. Holly spotted Pete, widened her eyes, and started screaming as well.

Lights came on, Raven pushed Pete away, footsteps hurried across the courtyard. Moments later, Dusty appeared in the doorway.

"Raven!" he gasped breathlessly. "What's the matter? What are these boys doing here?"

"They broke in here, Grandpa! The tall one grabbed me!" She pointed at Pete. "He was going to hit me!"

"Excuse me?" the Second Investigator exclaimed.

Dusty looked helplessly from Raven to Pete and back.

"That's not true at all!" Pete cried.

"Ooooh yes it is!" a female voice said and Holly slipped into the room behind Dusty. "I saw it clearly from the window! You were going to hurt her!"

Pete gasped in disbelief. "What?"

"Please, Holly, that's not true," Jupiter said calmly in a matter-of-fact manner. "Pete merely wanted to pull her away from the window because she suddenly screamed like that. It was a reflex."

"Of course you are on your friend's side because you are all in it."

Just then, Barclay, dressed in pyjamas, rushed into the room. "What happened?"

"The boys broke into Raven's room," Holly said, "and they were going to beat her up."

"Raven let us in!" exclaimed Bob.

"Are you stupid? Why would I do that?" Raven countered.

"Ever since you three turned up here, there has been nothing but trouble," Holly added. "It's now obvious to me that you were the ones who let Mr Sobek out."

"Wait a minute!" Pete cried indignantly, and then everyone started talking at once.

"Silence!" Finally, Barclay roared. "Now let me get this straight. Raven, what exactly happened?"

"I was reading and suddenly the door flew open, and the three of them rushed into my room. That's when I screamed. Luckily you heard me."

"Let me ask you this, Raven..." Bob interjected, "if we broke in here, why didn't the alarm go off?"

"How would I know?" Raven snapped. "Perhaps one of you tampered with the alarm earlier."

"That's what I thought too!" Holly exclaimed.

“That’s a bunch of lies,” Bob continued. “I’ll tell you why—the reason is that Raven switched off the alarm to let us in.”

“Now why would she do that?” Holly argued triumphantly. “You three are clearly troublemakers.”

“Holly, that’s enough!” Barclay reprimanded her and then said to the First Investigator: “Jupiter, your version now, please.”

“We wanted to talk to Raven, but didn’t want to wake anyone because it was so late. We threw pebbles at her window from outside the wall and she opened the gate for us to come in.”

“Why did you want to talk to her in the middle of the night?” Barclay asked.

Jupiter gave Raven a questioning look. He figured that if Raven were to reveal her motives, now would be the time to do so. However, she only briefly flashed a cold smile that no one saw except the First Investigator.

As a result, Jupiter decided to continue: “Raven is responsible for haunting Miranda Kramer the past few nights.”

“Ha!” Holly exclaimed in mock amusement. “This just keeps getting better!”

“It’s the truth,” Jupe asserted. “A friend of hers named Robert Ortega has been sneaking around this area the past few nights, scaring Miranda. Raven paid him to do it. He may also be responsible for Mr Sobek’s escape.”

“Absurd!” Holly exclaimed.

“Really, Jupiter, that doesn’t sound very believable,” Barclay commented. “Why would Raven do such a thing?”

“We don’t know that yet,” Jupiter replied. “That’s why we wanted to talk to her.”

“Absurd!” Holly repeated. “I’ve had enough of this! Barc, throw these three out, please! I further suggest that you contact Titus Jones and tell him what had happened here.”

Barclay looked at Jupiter doubtfully. “I think it’s really better if you leave now… and tomorrow you should go home. It’s not easy for me to say this, but we’d all prefer it. I’m sorry, Jupiter. I’d like to ask you to leave our property now.”

“Your property?” Pete snapped. “Don’t make me laugh!”

“Let it go, Pete,” Jupiter tried to calm the Second Investigator down. They were fighting a losing battle.

“I’m not letting anything go. This property belongs to Miles Kendall and he’s friends with Miranda. He would believe her and that means he would believe us.”

“What nonsense are you talking about?” Holly intervened again. “What has Miles got to do with this?”

“Okay, then let me put it to you in another way,” Pete replied. “We know you are all living comfortably here at Mr Kendall’s expense, and now you’re not even acting in his interests. Instead, you think Miranda is crazy.”

“Well, that’s the limit!” Holly barked.

Dusty cleared his throat and said very quietly: “Well, the boy has a point…”

“Oh, stay out of this, Dusty!” Holly warned. “I will not be called a freeloader by these brats!”

“I think the discussion is getting a bit out of hand,” Barclay said. “Miles is in Barbados now, and that can’t be helped. Now please go!”

“Come on, fellas,” Jupiter decided, and he had to drag the Second Investigator out of the room by the arm.

They left the guest house the same way they had come. The sound of angry voices reached them from upstairs, but then the shutters were closed and the boys couldn’t hear what

was said. Slowly they walked along the wall back to Miranda's house.

"Man!" Pete groaned. "I don't believe it! Raven's played a cold trick on us!"

Jupiter nodded thoughtfully. "She really did."

"Jupe, why are you so quiet?" asked Pete, annoyed. "Can you please get upset like any normal person would?"

"It's a pointless waste of energy," Jupiter muttered. "Besides, I'm thinking."

Pete rolled his eyes. "What are you thinking about, for goodness' sake?"

"About what you said—that things would be a little different if the owner were here... and it makes me wonder—where is Miles anyway?"

"We know that, Jupe," Pete replied. "He's in Barbados."

"Wasn't it Bermuda?" asked Jupiter.

Bob frowned. "I thought it was The Bahamas."

Jupiter snapped his fingers. "That's exactly what I'm getting at. This morning Barclay said Miles was in Bermuda. Just now, he said Barbados."

Pete shrugged his shoulders. "Bermuda, Barbados, does it matter where he really is? Barclay probably made a mistake."

"I would think so too, if Dusty hadn't claimed that Miles was in The Bahamas," Jupe said. "I may be wrong, Pete. Perhaps the inconsistency in stating Miles Kendall's vacation spot is simply due to the advanced age of his housemates... but then there's the matter of the phone call Bob overheard."

"You're right, Pete. If Miles were here, things would probably be very different. Miranda would have confided in him, the housemates might have believed her and us instead of kicking us out... and Raven would have had to explain her actions..."

"So that's why it can't hurt to ask ourselves—where is Miles Kendall?"

14. A New Client

“I still can’t believe it,” Miranda said again the next morning at breakfast. “I’ve been lying awake half the night wondering what Dusty’s granddaughter has against me. I like the girl. Why would she do something like that to me? Have I done something wrong?”

None of The Three Investigators had an answer to that. They had already talked at length and none of them could think of anything new to say.

“Raven won’t confide in us,” Jupiter eventually said. “Maybe you could talk to her in a quiet moment. She might show remorse and explain to you what it was all about.”

“In any case, the haunting is over,” Bob concluded. “We think you’ll be safe from now on.”

After breakfast, The Three Investigators packed their things and said goodbye to Miranda, who thanked them again profusely.

Shortly, the three of them left the little house and headed to Pete’s MG in the car park. Dusty’s Range Rover wasn’t there.

After they loaded their bags and got in, Bob asked: “So what now, Juve? We’re not really going home, are we?”

“No—” but that was as far as Jupiter got, for at that moment, he saw someone coming through the gate towards them. “It’s Dusty. He’s coming to us.”

All three of them got out.

“I’m glad I caught you guys!” Dusty gasped in relief, petting Sniffer. “Have you seen Raven?”

Jupiter shook his head. “Not since last night.”

Dusty rummaged around in the pocket of his brightly coloured trousers and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. “I just found this outside my door.”

Jupiter took the note and read it aloud:

Hi Grandpa Dusty,

By the time you find this note I won’t be here. Don’t worry, I’m fine, but I needed to get away from all this trouble. I’ll come back when the three boys are gone.

Raven

The First Investigator lowered the note and looked questioningly at Dusty.

“She took my car,” Dusty said. “I’m worried.”

“From the looks of it, we’re the reason your granddaughter ran away,” Bob said. “All we can do is keep saying we didn’t do anything to her. Unfortunately, no one believes us.”

“I believe you,” Dusty said.

“Is that so?” Pete remarked in surprise.

Dusty nodded and twirled his goatee. “Raven’s been hiding something from me... for about a week. Something’s bothering her. Besides, she asked me for money—quite a lot of it. She wouldn’t tell me what she wanted it for. Last night when you said she paid that boy to

scare Miranda, I thought that might be the reason. Of course, she denied everything, but I know Raven. She was desperate. She wanted to keep her secret at all costs... and besides, there's Sniffer." Dusty patted his dog. "Sniffer has a good sense of judging character. He hasn't barked at you guys once. He knows you three are good guys... and I trust him."

Pete was so uncomfortable with Dusty's obvious quirk that he didn't know where to look. Briefly, he caught Bob's gaze showing that he felt the same way.

However, Jupiter replied cheerfully: "We're glad, Dusty. In fact, we're very pleased, because if you help us, we might be able to solve the mystery after all."

"Really?" Dusty remarked.

Jupiter pulled a business card out of his pocket and handed it to the old man.

Dusty looked at the card in confusion. "—But I already know who you are."

Jupiter shrugged. "Think of it as a ritual of sorts. It's not a case for us until you have our card. Now let's not waste any time, we have a lot to talk about. However, I'd like to change locations for this." The First Investigator pointed to the main house. "Here we might be watched or overheard."

Dusty nodded eagerly. "We can meet at a diner in Oro Valley where we'll have some peace and quiet. You go ahead first. You'll find the place just as you enter town on the left side of the road. I'll borrow the Bentley from Barclay and then meet you there. Come on, Sniffer. Come on!"

The Three Investigators watched on as Dusty walked away with Sniffer.

"I kind of like both of them," Bob said when they were all back in Pete's car.

"Both of them?" Pete wondered aloud.

"Yeah, both of them. As they say, a dog is a man's best friend. Do you think you can ask Dusty what breed his dog is?"

Half an hour later, The Three Investigators were sitting on red upholstered benches in a nearly empty diner, drinking coffee. Country music blared from bad speakers and the smell of old grease lingered in the air. The coffee was hot and strong and just the thing they needed after last night's events.

Dusty arrived ten minutes later. He gave the waitress a quick wave and she nodded with a smile. Shortly afterwards, she brought him a cup of hot tea and also placed a dog bowl filled with water on the floor.

"I've been thinking," Jupiter opened the conversation. "We have absolutely no idea what could have led Raven to frighten Miranda. Until she talks to us, it's difficult to make any headway in this direction. We could instead look into a few other issues that at first glance seem to have nothing to do with Raven or Miranda, but are puzzling enough to warrant a second look. Foremost among them is the phone call you had with Carver Hardwick yesterday."

Jupiter had deliberately put the phone conversation Bob had overheard into play without any notice. Dusty's reaction did not disappoint him.

"Huh? Who am I supposed to have spoken to on the phone?" he asked, confused.

"With Dr Carver Hardwick—yesterday morning, just before Mr Sobek broke out."

Dusty shook his head. "I don't even have a mobile phone."

"I heard the phone ring in the house, very likely on a landline," Bob explained, "then the conversation took place on the first floor."

"Yeah, there is a second landline phone upstairs..." Dusty confirmed. "I definitely would have remembered speaking on the phone, but I don't. In fact, I didn't even use a phone the

whole of yesterday.”

“You know Hardwick, right?” echoed Jupiter.

“I see him sometimes when he visits Miles. He’s an old friend of his and also his family doctor for many years.”

“I overheard the conversation,” Bob explained, “and the man on the phone sounded a lot like you.”

The creases in Dusty’s forehead deepened and he twirled his little beard eagerly. “Strange you should say that.”

“Why?”

“It’s happened a few times that my voice has been mistaken for Miles’s. I guess we sound similar—at least that’s what some people say. Callers often mistake me for Miles or Miles for me.”

“It couldn’t have been Miles either,” Jupiter stated, “because he’s somewhere on vacation. Where did you say he is?”

“In The Bahamas.”

“Not Barbados?” echoed Jupiter. “—Or Bermuda?”

“Hmm...” Dusty said thoughtfully. “That could be as well.”

“Did he tell you about his planned trip?”

Dusty shook his head. “—But that’s nothing unusual. Miles sometimes packs his bags from one minute to the next and then spontaneously goes to Las Vegas or the seaside or flies to Hawaii or something. I think I was here in Oro Valley when Miles left.”

“So for this time, how did you know where he had gone to?”

“—Had to be from Barclay or Holly, I can’t remember exactly.”

“How long does he usually stay away?”

“A week or two...”

“His nephew Brian, who stopped by briefly yesterday morning, assumed that his uncle was around... which, along with the phone call, makes me suspect that either Miles is already back at Desert View... or that he was never away at all.”

“What? No...” Dusty shook his head. “That can’t be as I would have run into him by now.”

“Then who was talking to Dr Hardwick if it wasn’t you?”

Dusty looked at The Three Investigators perplexedly out of his watery blue eyes. “I don’t know.”

“There’s one way to find out,” Jupiter said, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

“You want to call Miles?” asked Bob. “Do you have his number?”

“I got his number from Uncle Titus,” Jupe replied. “I’ve tried calling him a few times this morning, but it always ended up on voicemail. So now, I will call Dr Hardwick instead.”

Jupiter dialled the number for telephone directory assistance and was connected to the private line of Carver Hardwick in San Diego.

After a few seconds, someone picked up. “Yes?”

“Dr Hardwick? Good afternoon, sir, my name is Jupiter Jones. I’m an acquaintance of Miles Kendall, and I’d like to speak to you for a moment.”

“Miles? I see... what is it about?”

“It may sound a little strange. His friend Dusty Kirkpatrick and I are just wondering about some inconsistencies regarding Mr Kendall’s whereabouts. You spoke to him on the phone recently, didn’t you?”

Dr Hardwick hesitated in his reply. “I must confess I feel a little caught off guard by your question...”

"I'm with Dusty now," Jupiter said. "Perhaps you are more comfortable speaking to him?"

"Uh... okay," Dr Hardwick replied.

"I'll pass the call on to him..." He activated the speakerphone feature so that everyone could listen in.

"Hi, Carver. It's Dusty here."

"How are you, Dusty? Who's the other caller?"

"Oh, he's a friend who is helping me sort out a little problem we have here at Desert View," Dusty replied. "In fact, this is all a little difficult to explain, but you'd be a great help to us if you could tell us when you last spoke to Miles."

"That was yesterday. I wanted to know how he was doing as I was a little worried."

"Why were you worried?" Jupiter interjected.

"—Because of a medical matter. I wanted to ask him how he was getting on with his new medication."

"So that's when you called him at home?"

"Yes."

"—And you spoke to him?"

"Yes," replied Dr Hardwick, audibly confused.

"Did he answer the phone right away?"

"No, Barclay answered the call first and then put Miles on to speak to me."

"Here's the thing, Dr Hardwick," Jupiter said. "We're worried about Mr Kendall too. Did anything strike you as odd about the conversation?"

Again Dr Hardwick hesitated a moment before he said: "Now that you've mentioned it, there was indeed something... but I can't put my finger on it... I've known Miles a long time... but yesterday, he sounded... different."

"Could it be that he was putting up a front?" Jupiter pondered aloud. "—Say for instance, someone is nearby and listening in on the conversation?"

"Yeah, maybe. That's one way to describe it."

"Could it have been because of what you wanted to know from him? Was it an uncomfortable matter?"

"Not really. I just wanted to know how he was doing."

"—Because of the new medication..." Jupiter recalled. "Can you tell us what the medication was?"

Dr Hardwick cleared his throat. "Excuse me, but this has really gone too far. I need to maintain patient confidentiality."

"Please, Carver," Dusty intervened. "Only you can help us."

Jupiter was sure that the doctor wouldn't go into it, but surprisingly, he said: "All right, but only because it's about Miles's health... He suffers from an irregular heartbeat. It's nothing unusual at his age, but it needs to be treated. If not, it could increase the risk of blood clots, which could then lead to stroke and, if persistent, could contribute to heart failure.

"I gave him blood-thinning medication. However, after his last check-up, it turned out that the medication was too weak. I tried to call him, because something like that could be dangerous. However, before yesterday, I didn't get to speak to him. That was why I called Brian and asked him to check on his uncle and let him know about a newer medication so he could get it."

"You know Brian?" wondered Jupiter.

"—Since he was a baby. I've been a long-time family friend."

"When did you call Brian?" Juve asked.

“Hmm...” Dr Hardwick mumbled. “Let me recall... that was... that was three days ago. Brian promised to take care of it. Still, I tried calling Miles again yesterday and finally got through to him. He said he had been travelling and for some reason his mobile phone had no service. He confirmed that Brian had given him my message and that everything was fine... but as I said... he didn’t sound very convincing. There was something strange about him, I just don’t know what it was.”

“Thank you, Dr Hardwick,” Jupiter said. “That was very informative. You were a great help to us.”

“If there’s anything wrong with Miles, you’ll let me know, won’t you?”

“Yes, we’ll get back to you. Have a good day!” Jupiter then ended the call.

“I am speculating that Barclay and Holly know where Miles is,” Pete blurted out. “They could probably be holding him captive... at Desert View—in a secret room that no one else knows about, including you, Dusty.

“When Dr Hardwick kept calling, Barclay was afraid he would eventually get suspicious and show up at the house. So he got Miles out of his prison and forced him to talk to Dr Hardwick and pretend everything was fine... and now Miles is in desperate need of medication! We have to do something!”

Dusty had gone pale during Pete’s incensed rant. “Goodness! Do you really think so?”

Bob interjected: “Well, when I overheard Barclay and Holly behind the wall yesterday, it didn’t sound like they were holding anyone captive.”

“Hmm...” Pete muttered, “then maybe it’s Barclay alone and Holly doesn’t know about it.”

“The presumed secret room would have to be very well soundproofed to keep Miles’s cries for help from being heard,” Bob continued.

“It could also be that no one hears the cries for help because there aren’t any,” Jupiter reasoned. “What if Miles isn’t being held prisoner—but is hiding?”

“Hiding?” Dusty repeated. “—But why?”

“I’m afraid that’s beyond me,” Jupiter admitted, “but if it’s true, he could be hiding from Holly, from Miranda, from his nephew Brian, or even from you... but not from Barclay. There must be a reason for that. I would imagine that Raven knows that reason, and that she’s in on it. That’s why she tried to get Miranda out of the way, and then unleashed Mr Sobek on us so we wouldn’t find out the secret. It’s all pure speculation, I admit, but everything that has happened is so unusual that there simply has to be a connection.”

“Hmm...” Bob muttered, “but what connection could that be?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out, and we’re going to do it tonight... if you help us, Dusty.”

15. A Gruesome Discovery

Dusty soon said goodbye and The Three Investigators spent the rest of the day in Oro Valley. They wanted to wait for the cover of darkness, banking on Barclay and Holly going to bed early after the previous turbulent nights.

They were not disappointed. They had just settled the bill for their dinner at the same diner when Jupiter's mobile phone rang. Pete's number was displayed. They had given Dusty the Second Investigator's phone so he could reach them.

"Hi Dusty, it's Jupiter. Is the coast clear?"

"I think so," Dusty whispered. "They've both gone to bed. All is quiet in the house."

"Good, we'll get going and be there in half an hour. You turn off the alarm and unlock the terrace door as we discussed. After that, it's best to go back to your room and switch off the lights. If we get caught, you can always say you had nothing to do with it. That way you'll remain our ace in the hole."

"All right, Jupiter." Dusty hung up.

The Three Investigators set off and half an hour later drove up the dirt track to the estate with the car lights switched off. At the top, Pete parked his MG behind a large boulder where it wouldn't be immediately seen.

Dusty could have opened the gate for them, but they had decided to take the more complicated route. If it came down to it, a gate opened from the inside would be harder to explain than if they had simply climbed over the wall.

They crept to the huge rock from where Bob had climbed onto the wall earlier.

"Now we'll see if Dusty really knows how to switch off the security system," the First Investigator muttered, climbing onto the rock and placing his hands on the top of the wall.

Jupiter bent one leg tentatively, but didn't know where to put his foot, and so lowered it back on the rock. "This is turning out to be harder than I expected."

"Get on with it, Juve. Even Bob got up there before, and he's half a head shorter than you!"

"—But also twice as athletic," Bob said, "yet I'm not athletic at all." He chuckled.

"We can analyze my physical abilities in detail at a later date. I'm always available for ridicule," Jupiter growled, "just maybe not at this moment. Right now, I'd appreciate it if you'd just help me out."

Pete and Bob grabbed the First Investigator's legs and hoisted him onto the wall.

"The alarm is off!" whispered Jupiter.

Then, Bob and Pete climbed up as well. Soon all three were standing on the top of the wall directly above the crocodile enclosure and balancing along it until they reached the pool. This was where the wall was almost level with the swimming pool on the inside, but very high on the outside, facing the desert.

Once they have gone past the swimming pool, they could simply step down onto the ground inside Desert View.

"We'll do as we discussed, fellas," Jupiter whispered. "Pete and I will go into the house while you keep watch here, Bob. If the lights go on anywhere or anything else suspicious happens, you alert us by the walkie-talkie!"

They tested the communication devices one last time, then Jupiter and Pete crept crouched towards the main house.

The terrace door slid open silently. Pete switched on his flashlight, but shielded the beam with his hand.

“Dusty said that the only possible place for a secret room would be in the basement,” he whispered, “and the basement entrance is behind the stairs.”

The basement door squeaked slightly. Jupiter and Pete held their breath, but nothing moved in the house.

“You first,” Pete murmured and gently pushed Jupiter towards the wooden steps. “—But leave the lights off. We’d better use the flashlights.”

“All right,” Jupiter said. He shone the flashlight forward and descended. Pete followed him.

The basement was a relatively large room with a stone floor and unplastered stone walls. It was rather cool, but a little musty down here. At least there were no cobwebs and it was reasonably clean.

On the walls were wooden shelves where canned food, bottles of wine and other supplies were stored. There were also some gas cylinders and large containers of drinking water. At the far right corner was a large capacity chest freezer humming quietly. Next to it was a wooden door.

Jupe went to the freezer, lifted the lid handle, and shone his flashlight into it. There were packets of frozen vegetables, grilled sausages, pizza, and the like.

“Only foodstuff in here, Pete,” Jupe said. “I guess the residents are very well-prepared for some sort of emergency... Let’s check out what’s behind that door.”

The First Investigator went to the door and whispered: “Mr Kendall?” There was no response. He then reached for the door handle and pushed it down.

“Locked,” he said and looked at Pete in a challenging way.

The Second Investigator immediately pulled his lock pick set out of his trouser pocket. The door lock was quite an old one and it didn’t take long for him to unlock it. Tensely, the Second Investigator pushed the door open and shone his flashlight in.

It was just another room, slightly smaller than the first, and furnished in the same way with wooden shelves.

Pete’s beam of light immediately caught something leaning against a corner. “Well, well,” he said. “Look what we have here—a tranquillizer gun! So this is where Mr Kendall kept it.”

“What else is in here?” Jupe shone his flashlight around and his beam of light caught something longish lying on the ground. “Look!”

Pete peered at the object in question and his eyes snapped open. At first, they couldn’t quite make out what it was. It seemed to be just a shapeless lump, covered in cloth... but as they drew closer, they realized that lying before them... was a human body!

The boys stood there in stunned silence, staring down at a man lying on his back, his eyes closed, and one of his arms clutching his chest—at the heart position.

Jupe rushed forward and began to feel for the man’s pulse. Scared stiff, Pete remained a distance behind.

Seconds later, the First Investigator turned round and said: “He’s dead, Pete.”

Bob sat on the ground beside an agave and kept his eye on the main house. At first, nothing moved, but then he heard a noise. It sounded like footsteps, and they were coming from

outside the wall. Was someone creeping around out there?

Bob scurried to the wall and peered over it. On the outside, everything was still and motionless. For minutes, he stood there, listening so intently that even his own heartbeat disturbed him.

There it was again! Footsteps—plain as day. Now Bob saw a figure as well, keeping close to the wall. Before he could make out who it was, the figure had already reached the corner and disappeared around it.

Bob cursed softly, stepped onto the top of the wall, and crept to the corner. The figure was nowhere to be seen. Bob immediately decided to go after the intruder, so he scrambled on to the huge rock in order to get off the wall to the outside.

By the time he reached the centre of the crocodile enclosure, he sensed some movement around the Joshua tree. He stopped to focus on it. Suddenly, a small dazzling red light flashed before his eyes, and he was momentarily blinded by it.

In the darkness interspersed with coloured dots, Bob noticed another figure running towards him. He involuntarily backed away and fell... into the crocodile enclosure!

16. Bob vs Mr Sobek

“Are... are you sure?” Pete stammered. “Shall I call an ambulance?”

“I’m quite sure, Pete,” Jupe replied. “Not only does he not have a pulse, but his body is cold as well.”

In shock, Pete staggered backwards to the furthest corner of the basement room, as far away from the body as possible.

Although the First Investigator was not unmoved by the sight of a dead man, he suppressed his shock and the impulse to run away. Instead, he turned his attention to the discovery with sober objectivity.

The dead man was dressed in a moss-green bathrobe. Initials were embroidered on the bathrobe—‘MK’.

“Miles Kendall,” Jupiter gasped, and his own voice seemed strange to him.

“I’m convinced that Barclay and Holly know about this!” Pete cringed at having spoken so loudly. Whispering, he continued: “We’re dealing with something sinister here! We need to call the police right now!”

Finally Jupiter stood up, and Pete rushed over, pulled him out of the room, and closed the door. “Jupe, we’ve got to get out before someone finds us down here!”

Unmoved, Jupiter began to pinch his lower lip.

“Now why don’t you leave your lip alone?” Pete pleaded. “Jupe, did you hear me? We need to get out of here right now otherwise we might get caught!”

“Raven must have known,” Jupiter muttered.

“Please, Jupe! There really is time to think after we’re out of here!”

“Raven knew, and she didn’t want Miranda to find out about Miles’s death, which would have inevitably happened sooner or later... so she tried to drive Miranda away. Raven tried to cover up Miles’s death. I find it hard to believe that she chose to do so... unless...”

“Unless what?” Pete asked half-heartedly. He knew that Jupiter would not rest until he had thought everything through thoroughly.

“—Unless she wanted to protect someone... someone very close to her... someone who might be involved in Miles Kendall’s death.”

Pete’s eyes widened. “You don’t mean...”

Suddenly there were frantic voices coming from above the basement stairs. Then they heard the basement door squeak open.

Pete and Jupiter were trapped!

As Bob fell, he landed on his side and rolled over. Fortunately there were no stones or rocks under him—just sand.

Mr Sobek! Where was he? Bob got up in a flash and looked around for the crocodile but in the darkness, it was nowhere to be seen.

Just then, a woman’s shrill voice shattered the night’s silence: “Heeelp!”

Bob didn’t know if it was the scream or something else that had startled the crocodile, but where a second ago there had been shadows, suddenly the huge reptile’s body was

moving. The only thing Bob really saw were the bright white teeth. Then a lamp went on somewhere in the house and a yellow rectangle of light fell into the enclosure.

The next moment, Mr Sobek darted towards Bob! Clearly, there was not enough time for Bob to get to the enclosure gate, let alone undo the latch to get out.

In a blink of an eye, Bob ran to the tree that stood in the centre of the enclosure. He grabbed the lowest branch and pulled himself up. Then he frantically clambered up to a more stable branch and perched astride it.

Below him the crocodile hissed and snapped at him, but even if Mr Sobek was a savage beast, it could not climb. Besides, it seemed to Bob that the crocodile, despite its aggressiveness, was more sluggish than it had been two days earlier. Probably the low night temperatures had cooled the reptile down so much that it had become slower. However, this did not mean that it was about to retreat. Even though the golden-brown speckled crocodile eyes were expressionless, Bob felt as if he could read in them the determination to wait patiently under the tree until Bob climbed down.

Nevertheless, he was trapped!

Something was happening in the house. A woman was talking loudly to someone at the top of the basement stairs.

“That’s Holly!” Pete whispered. “—Of all people...”

At first, it was difficult to make out exactly what she was saying. It seemed like an argument broke out. Then Holly called out loud enough that the Second Investigator could hear what was said: “I don’t care about that now, we have to save the boy!”

As she was coming down the stairs, her voice got louder: “What’s his name? Bob? I don’t know why the alarm didn’t go off, but it doesn’t matter now. Mr Sobek will tear him apart if we don’t do something! I’m getting the stun gun!”

Pete’s eyes snapped open and he wanted to repeat that to Jupiter, but the First Investigator waved it off. “I heard.”

Immediately, Jupe rushed back into the small room, grabbed the tranquillizer gun, and ran back out to rejoin Pete.

The next moment, the basement lights came on and Holly appeared in her nightgown. Behind her was Barclay in his striped pyjamas.

“Wha—” Holly stammered when she saw the two boys. “What are you two doing down here?”

Barclay too, looked surprise. “Never mind that now, Holly!” Then he noticed Jupiter holding the tranquillizer gun. “How did you get the stun gun? Let me have that!”

Instead of handing the gun to Barclay, Jupe thrust it into Pete’s hand. “Pete, can you handle it?”

Pete swallowed. “We’ll see about that.”

“Wait a minute!” Barclay protested, trying to stop Pete, but the Second Investigator stormed past him. He ran up the narrow stairs, then to the terrace door and outside, where he nearly collided with Dusty.

“Pete. I’m sorry, I didn’t hear Barclay and Holly and—”

“Never mind now!” Pete interrupted him and ran on. He hurried round the house to the enclosure. The gate was closed. Mr Sobek was lurking under the tree with his mouth open... and directly above the creature, sitting on a branch, was Bob.

“Bob!”

“Pete!” cried Bob, relieved. “You’ve got to help me! My goodness, is that a gun you’ve got? You’re not going to shoot Mr Sobek, are you?”

“No, just stun it,” Pete said while getting as close as he could to the crocodile from the outside. He pushed the barrel of the gun through the bars and released the safety catch. He remembered how this was done from a demonstration he saw at the Wildlife Learning Centre.

Pete took a deep breath and tried to calm his nerves. “Let’s hope this thing is loaded.” He took aim and pulled the trigger.

The bang was fairly quiet. Mr Sobek winced as it was hit above the right front leg.

The crocodile went crazy. It threw its body back and forth wildly, its tail shredded a small bush and sent the sand spraying in all directions. Desperately, it tried to get at the dart stuck in its body. Then its movements became slower and slower.

Suddenly the creature collapsed. Its eyes were still open and it was breathing heavily but beyond that, it seemed unable to move.

“Is it unconscious or something?” asked Bob anxiously.

“Perhaps,” Pete replied, “but I really don’t know.”

“How long does it take for the anaesthetic to take full effect?”

“I think it’s already effective. That’s all there is to it.”

“How long does it last?”

“I don’t know, Bob. Am I a zoo keeper or what? Now, I’ll go open the gate for you! You get ready to come out.”

Only when Pete had opened the enclosure gate did Bob dare to come down. Mr Sobek was still motionless, but remained looking at Bob.

Bob gave the crocodile as wide a berth as possible... but he did not take his eyes off the creature, which was why he didn’t see a bush at his feet and ran right into it. The thorns pierced his trousers. Bob panicked and broke away. As he did so, he kicked something hard that rattled.

Lying under the bush was something shimmering silver. Bob had kicked it halfway out. It was a metal briefcase. Bob frowned and bent down to pick it up.

“Bob!”

Pete’s yell made Bob cringe and look up. Life had returned to Mr Sobek. With an energy that a stunned crocodile should not have been able to muster, it ran towards him, snarling!

Bob realized that he was too far from the gate to escape. By reflex action, he grabbed the briefcase handle, stood behind the bush and prepared for action.

Suddenly Mr Sobek snapped at Bob. In precise timing, Bob swung the briefcase hard and whacked the crocodile’s sensitive snout from the side. The crocodile’s head flew sideways, but Bob didn’t notice that because now he was running for his life.

Not even a blink of an eye after Bob had left the enclosure, Pete slammed the gate shut, closed the latch, and secured it with the metal spike.

For a moment, it looked as if Mr Sobek wouldn’t let something as small as the gate stop it... but then, the crocodile suddenly stopped, flicked its tail back and forth—and for a second time, it collapsed!

17. Confessions

“For goodness’ sake, Bob, I had no idea that was you on the wall!” Miranda Kramer kept grabbing Bob’s shoulders as if to make sure he was really unharmed. They stood at the edge of the lighted pool, surrounded by Pete, Jupiter, Dusty, Holly, and Barclay.

After the anaesthetic had finally paralyzed Mr Sobek, Miranda had suddenly appeared. She confessed that it had been she who had startled Bob on the wall with the flash of her camera.

“I looked out my window and saw these figures sneaking around Desert View and climbing over the wall,” Miranda explained. “You guys weren’t here, so I decided to do something myself. I got out of my house and took cover with my camera to catch the perpetrators in the act.”

“That was our mistake, Miranda,” Jupiter admitted. “We should have informed you of our plans. Fortunately, everything went well.”

Bob, however, had a different understanding of ‘everything went well’, but he did not disagree. Still reeling from the horror, he realized that he was still tightly clutching the handle of the metal briefcase that had saved his life. By now, the handle had left distinct marks on his palms. Still dazed, he finally lowered the briefcase down on the ground next to him.

“So, with this matter settled... there’s still another to deal with,” Jupiter announced. “I’m going to call the police now.” He took his mobile phone out of his pocket.

“The police?” Barclay said calmly, but he couldn’t quite keep the fear out of his voice. “I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Mr Ward,” Jupiter replied. It suddenly seemed inappropriate to address the man by his first name. “We were in the small basement room. There is a dead body in there. This circumstance lies far outside our self-imposed area of expertise as investigators. It is therefore imperative that I—”

“Did you just say there is a dead body in the basement?” Dusty stepped closer and tugged at his goatee. “What’s the boy talking about, Barclay?”

Miranda also looked at Barclay expectantly. An uncomfortable silence fell over the group.

It was Holly who finally spoke up. She walked over to Dusty, put her hand on his shoulder and said: “It’s Miles, Dusty... He’s dead.”

Dusty was thunderstruck. “Excuse me?”

“He’s... down in the... basement...” Holly stammered, expressing horror on her face with each word she was saying. She put her hands over her mouth and whispered: “—In the small room!”

Dusty staggered and sat down on the ground where he was standing. “—But how...”

“You knew about this all the while,” said Pete sharply. He could not stand Holly’s mendacity any longer.

“Who?” asked Dusty, stunned.

“Holly, Barclay—both of them, I don’t know,” Pete said angrily. “Let the police deal with this. You two are somehow responsible for his death.”

“No, that’s not it,” a timid voice came from the corner of the house. Behind them stood Raven, her face partially covered by her black hair.

“Raven!” cried Dusty, jumping up and running to his granddaughter to give her a hug. “There you are, thank goodness! What on earth is going on?”

“Grandpa Dusty, please forgive me!” Raven sobbed and then burst into tears.

Barclay cleared his throat and said softly: “I’ll tell you all the story... from the beginning—the whole truth.” His open, cordial manner was gone. Now he seemed meek and guilty.

“It was a week ago—just another morning. Dusty was out shopping in Oro Valley; Holly was still asleep; Raven was off somewhere; and I was in the garage.

“At some point I got hungry and wanted to get something to eat from the fridge. As there was no more cheese, I went to the basement to get a new packet from the freezer. I then saw the door to the small room opened, so I went to close it. There I saw Miles on the floor. I don’t know how long or what exactly happened. My guess is that he had a heart attack or a stroke. Miles wasn’t the youngest anymore and not exactly the healthiest.”

Barclay swallowed hard. “I was shocked and called Holly in, since she was the only one here at the time.”

“I wanted to... to call the ambulance... right away,” Holly explained, “but Barc realized that... it was already too late.”

Barclay nodded. “That’s right. Holly already had the phone in her hand, but I held her back.”

“Did you know that in California, failing to report a death could result in misdemeanour charges, including jail time and fines?” Jupe felt compelled to point this out. “This particularly applies to deaths from accident, criminal or unnatural causes. The relevant authorities could conduct investigations as to how and when a person died—at least to determine any instances of foul play.”

“Uh...” Barclay mumbled. “I was at a loss and had other things on my mind.” Then he fell silent.

Into the silence, Jupiter said: “I presume you were wondering what consequences Miles’s death would have for you. Had Miles made provisions for you in his will? Had he stipulated that the three of you could continue staying here at Desert View? If not, all of his property could go to his next of kin—his nephew, Brian Kendall... who doesn’t like you, and would probably kick you out as soon as this place belongs to him.”

Barclay looked stunned for a couple of seconds before nodding slowly.

“—And somehow, you decided to keep others from finding out Miles’s death?” Jupe asked.

“—Only until we have certainty about his will,” Holly clarified.

“So you left your friend in that room just like that?” Pete exclaimed, stunned. “I can’t believe it! How can you be so heartless!”

“You have no idea...” Holly said tonelessly. “You have no idea how hard this has been for us... Miles had said it often enough that we could stay here for as long as we wanted... but none of us knew whether he had made any provision for that. We had to find out before we... before we told the others... and report his death to the police.”

“So what was your plan?” Bob asked.

“Miles’s death came as a shock,” Barclay took over the explanation. “None of us here has ever spoken about what if we can’t continue to stay here. Knowing Brian, he would want us out by tomorrow if he had his way... We needed time to consolidate our thoughts and prepare for any possibilities if the will is not in our favour—the worst being having to move out. We also wondered whether we could challenge the decision in court. Of course, that

would take time and money... so it might not be worth the effort, especially when we don't rate our chances.

"Rather than coming out with endless scenarios, we figured that it was best to get hold of Miles's will first, and then proceed from there. In fact, we were quite confident that we would find it..."

Tears welled up in Holly's eyes. "Eventually, we decided to lock the room so that Dusty wouldn't accidentally open it. I didn't want to do this... and neither did Barc. It was the worst thing I ever had to do... leave Miles in there... He was our friend. We wanted a decent funeral for him, and we still do..." She began to cry uncontrollably and pressed her face against Barclay's shoulder.

Holly's aggressive and hostile demeanour of the past few days crumbled before the eyes of The Three Investigators. They felt like they were seeing her true colours for the first time.

"Why didn't you want to tell me?" Dusty finally spoke up. "Miles was my friend as well."

"We would have told you, Dusty, for sure," Barclay explained, "but we were afraid that you wouldn't be able to take it if you had to worry about your future on top of your grief. That was why we told you that Miles had taken a spontaneous trip."

"In this state of shock, of course, it's easy to get Bermuda and Barbados mixed up," Bob realized.

"Eventually, how are you going to explain to people that he was never away?" Pete asked.

"That was easy because whoever knows Miles, knows that he is fond of making spontaneous trips without telling anybody beforehand," Barclay explained.

"So what happened next?" Pete continued probing.

"We had to react from day to day," Barclay admitted. "Without Dusty knowing, Holly and I frantically searched all over the house and went through Miles's paperwork. I even went back into the small basement room to search... but to no avail."

"Okay, suppose that you found the will and it was not made in your favour, what would you have done? Destroyed it?" Bob asked.

"Not so, as that would not work. For us to continue staying here, Miles's will has to state that—in one way or another. Anything else is as good as no will..."

"In any case, the effort took too many days. Finally, we decided that there was nothing we could do and we were ready to—how shall I put it... 'discover' Miles's body in the small room and report to the authorities accordingly. We had to think about what, when, and how to tell Dusty and Miranda. To make matters worst, Brian turned up, various people called and wanted to speak to Miles. Then you three guys came, and it was very awkward for us to... how shall I put it—"

"We did not want you three to have to witness such an event," Holly interjected.

"So was that why you were so against having us around?" Pete asked.

Holly nodded. "I'm sorry boys. It is not my nature to treat people like that, but in view of the circumstances facing us, I was disoriented and not being my true self."

Barclay added: "On the hindsight, what we did was probably a very stupid move that could get us into a lot of trouble."

"I won't comment on that," Jupe said, "but what is done, is done, so we have to move on from here."

Everyone then fell silent, trying to digest all the information that had been revealed.

Jupiter began to walk slowly up and down the terrace. "There's one more thing that neither of you two knew about... and that there was someone else who was in on the secret—"

namely, Raven.” He stopped in front of the girl. “How did you find out?”

“I overheard everything,” Raven said quietly. “I happened to go into the house to get some food when I overheard the conversation in the basement. I was at the basement door when Holly started crying. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I heard every word anyway—including not wanting to say anything to Grandpa Dusty and Miranda just yet...”

“Then you decided that Miranda must never know,” Jupe deduced.

Raven nodded, barely noticeable. Her voice was getting quieter. “She’s new here. She would never have kept the secret to herself... and then that Brian would have got Desert View and Grandpa Dusty would have had to pack his bags. Then where would he have gone? That’s why I figured that Miranda should never know.” Raven couldn’t bring herself to look Miranda in the eye during her confession.

“So you tried to drive her away with the help of your friend Robert,” Jupiter said. “Then when we showed up, you also wanted to drive us away. Did you or Robert set off the alarm to make us look like burglars?”

“No! That’s not true!” Raven defended herself.

“What about Mr Sobek? Did you release it to either frighten us away or get the blame put on us?”

“I did no such thing!” Raven exclaimed. “I was not involved in both the alarm and Mr Sobek’s escape!” She looked pleadingly round the room and saw how shocked Miranda was. That’s when Raven turned and walked away.

Dusty hurried after her.

“I don’t blame her,” Miranda said softly. “She’s probably right. I don’t know if I would have been willing to keep Miles’s death a secret. Raven and Dusty are very close. She was trying to protect her grandfather. We know that of all of us here, Dusty would be the least able to cope going elsewhere. He’s lived at Desert View for twenty years—he belongs here. If he had to leave... he’d be lost.”

“There’s one thing I still don’t understand about this whole story though,” Bob spoke up, turning to Barclay. “The phone call. Who spoke to Carver Hardwick yesterday morning?”

When Barclay just looked at him questioningly, Bob continued: “I overheard the phone call on my way to the bathroom. You answered it and then you passed the call to someone else. Who was that?”

“Oh... um... you mean the second man on the phone... that was me.” Then when Barclay continued explaining, he disguised his voice so much that he sounded like a different person: “I was an actor. I used to perform on small stages, imitating politicians. It’s pretty easy for me to imitate Miles. After all, I lived with him for many years.”

“You could fool many people,” Jupiter said, “but you still couldn’t find the will.”

“Yes,” Barclay replied in his normal voice. “Like I said earlier, we searched everywhere. Miles once said that he put the really important papers in ‘a very safe and guarded place’. We’re quite sure that it wasn’t in a safe deposit box because he doesn’t have one... We don’t know.”

“A very safe and guarded place?” Jupiter frowned and looked at Bob and Pete. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“A very safe and guarded place?” Pete repeated. “Off hand, I could think of something.”

Just then, Bob looked down next to his feet. In the course of the emotionally-charged conversations, he hadn’t given another thought to the briefcase from the enclosure.

18. Sniffer is Happy

“Do you really think...” Bob began as he picked up the briefcase.

“A crocodile enclosure is a pretty safe place, I’d say,” Jupiter said, “and Mr Sobek would be considered an excellent guard.”

“This briefcase was hidden in there—in a bush.” Bob walked over to the terrace table, set the case down, and proceeded to open it. Immediately the latches snapped open. Carefully, Bob flipped the lid up.

Inside were several labelled folders. Bob took out one folder after another and read the labels: “‘Life insurance’... ‘Securities’... ‘Property deeds’... and here we are—a will.”

Barclay and Holly held their breath and looked eagerly over Bob’s shoulder as he opened the folder. There were only a few sheets of paper, and the most important thing was right on top.

Bob read the text carefully. It was very clearly worded. “It says that in the event of his death, Miles Kendall’s entire estate, including his Desert View property, will be left to his only living relative—his nephew Mr Brian Kendall.” He swallowed. “This will was drawn up and signed two years ago. It’s notarized.”

Bob lowered the document and looked regretfully at Holly and Barclay. The two stood thunderstruck, holding each other’s hands.

“That’s it,” said Barclay tonelessly. “This is the end. We will pack our things and leave Desert View.”

“Hold on a minute, Barclay,” Jupe called out. “There is still this little matter of me calling the police.”

Barclay stood there silently with a worried face. After a few moments, he said to the First Investigator: “Jupiter, can I have a word with you privately?”

“Sure,” Jupe said and both of them walked off a distance away out of earshot.

“What’s going on now,” Pete asked.

“Hmm...” Bob muttered. “I’m not sure, but I have a good guess. Let’s wait for Jupe to come back.”

Fifteen minutes later, Jupe was back and called Pete and Bob to him. They remained on the terrace while Barclay called the rest into the house and closed the terrace door. To cope with the shock and grief, they certainly didn’t need the three boys around.

“Jupe, how did it go?” Pete asked.

“Okay, I’m going to call the police in a minute,” Jupe said. “I am going to report to them exactly what had happened, and what Pete and I discovered in the small basement room. Just leave all the talking to me. If you do have to say anything, just keep to the events leading up to our find.”

“What about the confessions we heard just now?” Pete asked.

“That we will leave to Barclay and the rest of them,” Jupe replied. “It’s up to them what they want to tell the police. We will keep out of it.”

The First Investigator then took out his mobile phone and called the police. Shortly afterwards, he hung up. “The police are coming,” he reported.

"I didn't think the case would take such a turn," Pete commented as he stared at the horizon.

"It's sad," Bob agreed, "but from what Dr Hardwick had said, Miles Kendall had had health problems for some time. He was an old man."

Pete sighed. "Yes... we can close the case now, but the four of them have lost a friend... and their home."

"We can't close the case yet, I'm afraid," Jupiter said broodingly.

Pete looked at him, frowning. "I don't like the sound of your voice, Jupiter Jones. What else is there now?"

"Raven confessed to everything—except the alarm activation and the release of Mr Sobek. If she didn't do that, who did?"

"Maybe Raven was lying," Pete suggested.

"Why would she do that now that the truth has come out?"

Pete didn't know the answer to that.

"All the mysteries have been solved except these two... which leads me to strongly suspect that there is a causal connection between the two events. Think about it, fellas! What's the connection between the alarm activation and Mr Sobek?"

"Hmm..." muttered Bob. "If the alarm activation wasn't planted to get rid of us, then someone was really trying to break in. What exactly happened? The alarm went off when we were in Miranda's house. We ran out, and I saw the intruder and chased him... but at the gate, Holly knocked me out."

Jupiter nodded. "After that, we all stood outside the gate and cleared up the misunderstandings... and here's where it gets interesting—as we were saying goodbye, I reminded Barclay to switch the alarm system back on. He said it wasn't necessary as it was still activated, meaning that it would switch on automatically every evening and switch off again in the morning. Isn't it possible that the intruder was still nearby at that time? It was pretty dark around us, so he could have been hiding behind somewhere, eavesdropping. Suppose he overheard every word, then he would have known that the alarm will trigger off with a break-in at night... but not during the day."

"You mean he came back the very next morning?" asked Pete. "—But nearly everybody was at home then!"

"Yes, but you can't see the crocodile enclosure from many places inside the house... and from the terrace," Jupe explained. "The intruder could have easily climbed over the wall. He might even have simply walked through the gate and then headed straight for the enclosure."

"—And that's when he released Mr Sobek?" asked Pete.

"Yes," Jupe agreed. "He just had to open the gate, and either lured or waited for Mr Sobek to get out."

"Why did he do that for?" asked Pete.

"That's exactly the question, Pete, and the answer is quite simple. It wasn't just about releasing the crocodile. It was about getting into the enclosure. When Mr Sobek created a commotion on the terrace, the intruder went into the enclosure. That was when he left his shoe prints that Bob photographed. He was in there to do something."

Pete's eyes snapped open. "You don't mean..."

Jupiter nodded. "I wish we could find some proof of this theory because we don't have any yet."

"Wait a minute!" Bob exclaimed and his face brightened. "I might just be able to get the proof we need!"

Shortly before midnight, the police appeared at Desert View. Led by a police sergeant, they first took statements from Jupiter and Pete. Now the police officers were standing with the residents on the terrace bathed in blue pool light.

Jupiter had decided that it was best for him and his two friends to stay a distance away, out of earshot. As agreed earlier with Barclay, The Three Investigators would not interfere with the residents' report to the police. From afar, they could see that the conversation was going well. Barclay was doing most of the talking, Holly contributed a bit amidst sobbing and tears. The rest of them stayed in the background.

Shortly afterwards, the sound of a car approached and Brian Kendall entered the terrace. He looked upset as he walked past the three boys as if they were invisible, and headed straight to the group. As it was time to make their move, Juve signalled to Pete and Bob to slowly approach the group.

"Mr Ward!" Brian called out. "The police called me. Is it true? My uncle is... dead?"

Barclay nodded.

"For goodness' sake!" Brian exclaimed. "How did this happen? And when?"

"His body was found in the basement."

"What? I was here yesterday morning and you said he was in Bermuda!"

Barclay had turned pale. He stroked his face wearily. "It's complicated Brian. It's better you sit down first and I'll tell you all about it."

"Hold on, Barclay," Jupiter said, "we have something to say first."

"This may not be the time, boy," said the sergeant.

However, the First Investigator was not deterred. "Sorry, Sergeant. Right now, I have something important that needs clearing up." Then he turned to Brian. "Mr Kendall, when was the last time you spoke to Dr Carver Hardwick?"

Brian Kendall looked at Jupiter in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"Dr Carver Hardwick—an old friend of your family."

"I don't know when I last spoke to him, and I don't know why this is relevant—"

"I'll be happy to jog your memory," Juve interjected. "It was three days ago. Dr Hardwick asked you to get in touch with your uncle, as he was unable to reach him himself. He urged you to tell your uncle about the new medication he needed to reduce the risk of blood clots."

Brian Kendall frowned. "Okay, so he told me... so what?"

"Did you consider this important?"

"Excuse me? Of course I—"

"Instead, you've been thinking that now would be a good time to change your uncle's will in your favour."

"What?" Brian Kendall looked horrified.

"For months you tried to persuade your uncle to invest his money profitably instead of spending it on expensive trips and his, in your eyes, good-for-nothing friends. You feared for your inheritance, and rightly so... because Miles Kendall actually had no intention of leaving his fortune to his nephew who never cared about him—only about his money."

"What?" Brian Kendall exclaimed. "Who are you to accuse me of this?"

Jupiter continued unperturbed: "As we know, Miles Kendall was a very organized man who always kept his paperwork in order. For years, he had talked about leaving his fortune to his friends. It is very unlikely that he did not make provision for this in his will. Nevertheless, his last will and testament states that you are the sole heir. How do you account for that?"

"I—"

“That was a rhetorical question,” Jupiter interrupted him gruffly. “I can tell you—the will we have here is a forgery. You knew the original will was hidden in the crocodile enclosure and switched it for a forgery. The first attempt two nights ago failed because the alarm system went off, but you overheard our conversation and learned that the system would be turned off during the day... so you came back the next morning.”

“We were at the gate and that’s when I spotted you on the canyon slope in the shadow of a boulder,” Bob recalled. “You were just standing there, and it didn’t look as if you were on your way up here. In fact, you were lying in wait and didn’t want to be seen. That’s why you had left your car down by the road instead of driving into the car park here. It wasn’t until you realized that I had seen you that you got moving, came up to us, and pretended you were coming here, to your uncle’s house.”

“When we were all sitting on the terrace having breakfast, which you probably overheard from outside the wall, you finally sneaked in,” Pete said angrily. “You had to get into the crocodile enclosure but it was too dangerous with Mr Sobek in there, so you opened the gate to release the monster. Then you entered the enclosure, got the briefcase, and exchanged the will.”

The sergeant, who had listened to the whole story in disbelief, now turned to Brian questioningly. “What do you say to that, Mr Kendall?”

“This is utter nonsense!” Brian snapped. “I’m just finding out that my uncle has died, and I now have to endure baseless accusations from three smart-aleck rascals!”

“They won’t be baseless,” Bob argued, “once we get the proof that you were indeed in the crocodile enclosure.” He then turned to the sergeant. “Sir, with any luck you’ll find a pair of sports shoes in Mr Kendall’s car. The soles should correspond exactly with the prints I photographed in the crocodile enclosure. What’s more, the soles should have remnants of sand and soil from the said enclosure. A laboratory test should prove that.”

“John,” the sergeant said and turned to a colleague. “Go and see if what the boy says is true?”

“My car’s locked,” Brian said.

“Then please come with me,” Officer John said.

“I’m under no obligation to do so.”

The sergeant interjected: “Sure, but it’s a mere formality to get a warrant to search your car. If you cooperate now—”

Brian cut the sergeant off with a gesture and followed Officer John and another policeman.

“Is all this really true?” asked Holly, horrified. “Is Brian responsible for his uncle’s death because he didn’t tell him about the medication?”

“Not so, Holly,” Jupiter disagreed. “It shouldn’t be so based on the timing of the events. Remember you and Barclay saying that Miles had not been around for almost a week? Well, it was only three days ago that Brian was informed by Dr Hardwick about the medication. As it is, I can only say that Brian is responsible for the forgery of the will.”

Bob looked at Pete and both of them understood Jupiter’s careful choice of words.

Suddenly, they heard shouting from the road. It lasted only a few seconds, and the commotion ended as quickly as it had begun.

A few moments later, they all returned—only this time Brian was in handcuffs. “He tried to escape,” Officer John explained tersely to the sergeant.

“—And we found this.” His colleague held up a clear plastic bag containing a pair of sports shoes.

Jupiter crossed his arms in satisfaction. “The evidence lends credence to the will being a forgery. Are we hearing a confession, Mr Kendall?”

Brian stared darkly and grimly at Jupiter, Pete and Bob. “You rascals!” he finally managed to utter something.

Then he was taken away.

Two hours later, personnel from the coroner’s office came to remove Miles Kendall’s body for forensic examinations to determine the cause and manner of death.

“What a sad ending to this case,” Pete remarked, “but we have done our part, and we can finally close the case.”

“In a way, yes,” Jupiter said, “although there are still some unfinished business for the residents, particularly Barclay.”

“—Such as?” Pete wondered.

“He has to contact Dr Hardwick, tell him about Miles, and explain the phone conversation mess. On the hindsight, he should have kept to the story about Miles being in Bermuda or wherever, but he chose to impersonate him. How he is going to get out of this, is all on him.”

“I know another thing they have to do...” Bob added. “Mr Sobek.”

“Yes, Bob,” Jupe agreed. “With Miles gone, it would be a struggle for the rest to continue having Mr Sobek around. Given their age, it would be difficult for them to feed their reptile friend and clean its enclosure—”

“Not to mention the danger Mr Sobek poses if it somehow escapes again,” Pete interjected.

“Of course,” Jupe affirmed. “I guess it is best for the residents to contact the wildlife department and have them take care of it.”

“What are you going to tell Uncle Titus when we get back to Rocky Beach?” Bob asked.

Jupe paused for a while before saying: “I’d just say whatever we have reported to the police.”

Just then, Dusty came out from the terrace door and waved to the boys to join the rest in the house.

When The Three Investigators entered, the group was seated in the living room. Barclay and Holly were holding hands, and Dusty was seated with his granddaughter on one side and Miranda on the other.

“I still can’t believe it,” Holly remarked. “Is all this really true? We can stay here?”

“It certainly looks that way,” Jupiter said, “even though at the moment, you do not have the real will. Wait for the outcome of the police interrogation with Brian Kendall. He might have the genuine document, if he has not destroyed it. If so, there is a chance that he will surrender it to the police... otherwise, you probably have to track down Miles’s notary—the real one, not the one listed on the forged document.”

Suddenly Holly got up and gave the First Investigator a big hug. “Thank you!” She said between sobs. Pete suppressed a giggle, but it was his turn next... and after that, Bob.

“Look how happy Sniffer is!” said Dusty. “He knows that everything will work out fine!”

Although none of them saw the dog, of course, they all nodded and rejoiced with the old man.